

OPINION

by Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, PhD

on

the competition for the academic position of
Professor in 2.3 Philosophy at New Bulgarian University,
announced in *State Gazette*, no. 93 of 26 November 2019,
in which the only candidate is
Assoc. Prof. Lilia Gurova, PhD

As the submitted self-assessment and supporting evidence show unambiguously, by scientometric indicators Assoc. Prof. Lilia Gurova, PhD, the only candidate in the competition for the academic position of Professor of Philosophy at New Bulgarian University, significantly exceeds the national minimum requirements for occupying this position. Especially impressive are her scores on the following groups of indicators:

1. Publications (Group D), where Gurova's 55 articles and studies published in the last five years have garnered her 643 points, with a required minimum of 200 points – a significant part of those publications are in prestigious refereed and peer-reviewed journals;
2. Citations (Group E), where Gurova's publications have received 64 citations, earning her 560 points, with a required minimum of 100 points;
3. Supervision of doctoral students and project participation (Group F), where she has 580 points, with a required minimum of 100 points.

Gurova also exceeds the minimum requirements regarding teaching, administrative and public activities. Although her points on these indicators do not exceed the required minimum by several times, as do those on the above-mentioned indicators, I can confirm from personal experience that this is due solely and only to the limitations in the calculation system. Assoc. Prof. Gurova is one of the most active faculty members at New Bulgarian University, who has had, and continues to have, a significant influence on the academic and administrative development of her department as well as of the university as a whole. Her personal “inferential contribution” is objectively significant in all those aspects.

As the above brief review shows, Assoc. Prof. Lilia Gurova, PhD, does not merely meet but significantly exceeds all formal and quantitatively measurable requirements for occupying the position of Professor.

On the substantive plane, we must also say that Assoc. Prof. Gurova is an accomplished professional in the field of positivistically understood and formalistically oriented philosophy of science, with additional specializations in philosophy of cognitive science and psychology, as well as in history of Bulgarian philosophy. Her scientific contributions, which are real and accurately formulated, are precisely in those areas.

Here I will discuss only her most significant contribution: an inferentialist analysis of explanation and understanding, presented most fully in her monograph *Explanation, Understanding, and Inference* (Sofia: New Bulgarian University, 2019; in Bulgarian). All quotations below are from this monograph.

Most notably, the monograph shows in-depth knowledge of the state of research and debates on “explanation” in analytically- and positivistically-oriented philosophy of science after Carl Hempel; in most cases, the different theories and positions are clearly and critically articulated, making the book accessible to a wider audience. In this context, Gurova builds also her authorial project, called “inferentialist analysis”. This project starts from a common-sense intuition that can be found also in the tradition of utilitarianism: an explanation is the better the more useful it is. Utility is conceived of (although the word “utility” is not used in the monograph) as follows: an explanation is good if it leads to understanding, and there is understanding when we can make inferences. Hence, the explanation of a given phenomenon (word, phrase, theory, physical phenomenon, or event) is the better the more understanding it brings, i.e. the more inferences in different directions it allows us to make on its basis.

A specific problem of the project is that “explanation” and “understanding” are not strictly defined. Gurova insists that this is so because of the choice of an almost deflationist, minimalist approach to these concepts:

The inferentialist approach, defended here, nevertheless accepts a minimalist concept of the structure of explanation, according to which every explanation consists of an explanans, an explanandum, and some relation between them. Besides this, the inferentialist approach puts forth a claim regarding the main function of explanations, which is to bring understanding and to improve the already existing understanding. (p. 40)

Gurova insists that such minimalism is not a disadvantage but an advantage because, considering the still fluid state of knowledge about the processes of understanding in neurophysiology and cognitive science, it allows generalizing the different existing philosophical concepts of understanding and, furthermore, it is sufficiently effective in practical-operative terms: “sufficient to distinguish explanations that bring understanding from explanations that do not bring understanding or lead to incorrect and superficial understanding of the explained object” (p. 141).

I agree that in a certain pragmatic sense – from the point of view of an everyday instrumental rationality – such a broad understanding of understanding and explanation is relevant. I also agree that it is also relevant for some practices of scientists as well as maybe for modern science as a more general and practice-orienting rational ideology. It is certainly relevant for the more extreme advocates of a purist scientific ideology, such as are to be found among the followers of Rudolf Carnap and Carl Hempel. Actually, what makes Gurova’s inferentialist approach convincing is that it is formulated through an analysis of the different theories about explanation and causality after Hempel, with an emphasis on the more positivistic and (classic) analytical ones, and largely relying on articulating the family resemblances between them. That is also why I consider it to be a contribution.

It would be good, however, to also see more clearly what its limitations are. That is because for the time being, this inferentialist analysis neither covers all practices nor gives us tools for strictly distinguishing between the practices it does cover.

First, from the point of view of a broader concept of experience and of the greater possibilities for use in everyday language, the concept of “understanding” implied by Gurova as an capacity to make inferences is heavily reductive. We often say we understand a metaphor or a sonnet, but understanding in these cases could hardly be reduced to inference-making – when someone makes too many inferences after a concert, we get the rather bad feeling that he or she is killing the music. Is jazz improvisation an inference? In other words, although it is minimalist, i.e. maximally wide in scope, Gurova’s concept of “understanding” by no means covers either all meaningful uses of this word or all practices of actual understanding.

Second, the too broad – minimalist – concept of explanation and understanding leaves other things unclear as well. On the one hand, distinctions between science and pseudo-science, between explanations and pseudo-explanations, between subjectivist and objective concepts are systematically made in Gurova’s texts at the rhetorical level. Occasionally, there are also declarations: “I think that the

inferentialist relations are objective and determine the relations of “acceptance” and “permission”, without they themselves being a product of, or coinciding with, those relations” (p. 139). Occasionally, there are also some categorical and hasty assessments accusing wholesale – for example, the pragmatist theories – of subjectivism and relativism (p. 78). This categorical rhetoric clearly and honestly declares the author’s general positivistic attitude but, on the other hand, it is not carefully elaborated – probably because the self-evidence of some concepts is relied upon by default à la Popper. This understanding-by-default, however, calls into question the possibility of calculating the “inferential contribution” of an explanation. Strictly speaking, the minimalist concept, as formulated by Gurova so far and beyond the categorical normative rhetorical pathos, does not specify a criterion by which explanations through “Mercury’s retrograde influence” should be regarded as pseudo-explanations. Such explanations, which are close to (the mentioned at the end of book, but left unelaborated) conspiracy theories in fact provide a maximally wide possibility of making a practically infinite – random – number of inferences. Does this mean that they are the best explanations? Of course, neither Gurova nor anyone present here would agree with that. But the minimalist concept cannot remain as minimalist as it is now if it wants to answer this question. Perhaps if the idea of “depth” of causal relationships, introduced by John Henry Newman, is carefully and appropriately revised for the purposes of inferentialist analysis, it could be useful in this regard.

Gurova’s inferentialist analysis is an interesting and provocative authorial project which, however, needs additional fine-tuning and justification which, I hope, will be done in the near future. It is certain that this project has already merited – and will continue to merit – attention from the Bulgarian and international academic community.

In conclusion, based on the above, I categorically declare that Assoc. Prof. Lilia Gurova, PhD, **meets and even significantly exceeds all quantitative and substantive requirements for occupying the academic position of Professor in Area of Higher Education 2.3 Philosophy**, as well as that in my capacity as member of the Scientific Jury, **I unconditionally support her appointment to this position at New Bulgarian University.**

Sofia

26 March 2020

Sincerely,

Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, PhD

New Bulgarian University