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**Review: *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective*
by David McPherson**

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David McPherson. *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 222 pages. \$99.99 (hardcover).

“I want to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it was all for.”
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brother Karamazov*

What is the meaning of it all? This question strikes us in quiet moments—perhaps when we are standing near the crashing of waves, among pine-scented winds, or before a setting sun. For most of us, the thought vanishes all too quickly, and we return to our busy work-a-world lives. Yet, when tragedy strikes—when faced with searing pain or chilling loss—we may also wonder in a different way: “What is the meaning of it all?” As David McPherson asks it: “Is life worth living in the face of evil and suffering?” In both questions, we face a “cosmodicy”, that is, the need to answer the ultimate questions of purpose and meaning. Perhaps what is essential to answering these questions is an ancient concept: *virtue*.

Unearthed like an archeological find, virtue ethics is comparatively new in contemporary moral philosophy, and provides an attractive alternative. For much of the 20th century, deontology (which focuses on duty) and consequentialism (which focuses on the end results of actions) dominated academic ethics in the English-speaking world. Contemporary virtue ethics retrieves the grammar and concerns of the ancient Greek philosophers to focus on the state of one’s character or one’s habitual nature—in short, one’s state of being. For virtue ethicists, it is the fulfillment of one’s nature, as citizen of a particular community and as a member of the human species, that is the highest end: the achievement of “happiness,” or what Aristotle called flourishing or *eudaimonia*. Contemporary virtue ethics has emerged as a powerful and promising alternative in secular academic ethics. McPherson’s new book, *Virtue and Meaning*, advances this debate by bringing into

focus a shortcoming in contemporary virtue ethics: because human beings are “meaning seeking animals” (1), virtue ethics needs more than the flattened, secular outlook of modernity that reduces human flourishing to a mere “natural function.”¹

In other words, the flourishing human life, as envisioned by most of today’s neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, is more “neo” than “Aristotelian.” The good life of practicing the virtues, as proposed by the new virtue ethicists, is little different than from what’s implicit in modern deontology and utilitarianism. McPherson, a philosopher from Creighton University, draws from Charles Taylor, who has described our secular age as involving a disenchanted view of reality where faith and questions of deep meaning are mostly disregarded, or treated in merely personal, subjective terms, as “one human possibility among others.”² McPherson argues that a disenchanted view of human nature does not square with our search for deep meaning. What is needed, according to McPherson, is a “re-enchanted” view of the world, of meaning, and of human flourishing.

A re-enchanted view of reality allows us to uncover a realm of “strong evaluative meaning” and reclaim fundamental human values, like the noble, dignified, and reverence worthy (32, 39). After situating his project in the contemporary debate, his task is to open up a space for a consideration of wonder, awe, and a sense of the grandeur of existence by extending the vocabulary

of the virtues to include “piety, humility, existential gratitude, and loving devotion” (42).

McPherson argues that without the virtues we are blind and unresponsive to the deeper meaning in life. Having courage, self-control, and wisdom allows us to achieve human flourishing, true happiness—“a higher nobler, more meaningful mode of life” (53). We can see our lives as “wholes” connected to a “narrative quest” rather than as dismembered, functional, productive parts (53). This does not mean that the pursuit of strong evaluative meaning aided by the virtues will ensure ease and pleasure. Things may fall apart. Nonetheless, in the face of great evil McPherson thinks that—aided by the virtues—we should still seek “*righteousness, come what may*” (68). This was true of the Letter-Writers who faced Nazi persecution with dignity, courage, and even joy. In seeking these deeper purposes, we will find a richer good than fleeting happiness. Moreover, McPherson thinks that in the long run there is a “buoyance of the good”—a phrase borrowed from John Cottingham (74), McPherson’s strong evaluative meaning transforms the contemporary conception of happiness and meaning. Further, it reveals a shortcoming in modern virtue ethicists’ understanding of human flourishing. Yet, *Virtue and Meaning* goes one step further.

We are “*homo religiosus*,” McPherson argues: We are made for spirituality. Beyond our work, our entertainment, even our moral striving is a deeper longing that can only be fulfilled in contemplation. As Josef Pieper puts it,

All practical activity, from practice of the ethical virtues to gaining the means of livelihood, serves something other than itself. And this other thing is not practical activity. It is having what is sought after, while we rest content in the results of our active efforts. Precisely that is the meaning of the old adage that the *vita activa* is fulfilled in the *vita contemplative*.³

This contemplative activity is spiritual. In part, it is the pursuit of wonder with a philosophical attitude that becomes a “way of life” (169). Even more, contemplation allows us to see the world with new

eyes: to partake in a “loving or affirmative beholding” (177). As McPherson says, “all of our work and striving is fulfilled in attentive appreciation of our work as well as the world around us” (177). In this, we can come to “feel at home” in the world—at least, in part. McPherson thinks that a wide variety of cosmic outlooks point to our quest for meaning. Nonetheless, McPherson affirms that we are made for a personal relationship with a loving God beyond this life. We are to give thanks “to” someone for the goodness of existence. In sum, McPherson presses home the need for re-enchantment. In doing so, McPherson’s *Virtue and Meaning* is an important book that points toward a new era of virtue ethics.

After reading McPherson’s book, two weighty questions arise for me. First, does McPherson’s criticism do justice to Alasdair MacIntyre—a philosopher central to the revival of virtue ethics? McPherson places MacIntyre among the quasi-scientific virtue ethicists. He charges MacIntyre with holding that human flourishing is “instrumental”, making our love for others merely part of “good functioning” (83). Against this, McPherson argues that only a re-enchanting conception of strong evaluative meaning allows us to see the true “dignity” and “sanctity” of others, especially the marginalized and those facing great disability. However, I find myself wondering whether McPherson presents an overly disenchanting MacIntyre. For example, MacIntyre writes, “the deepest desire of every [human] being, whether they acknowledge it or not, is to be at one with God” (quoted in McPherson, 187).

As such, MacIntyre’s view seems open to the sort of re-enchantment proposed by McPherson. If so, then MacIntyre should be included with virtue ethicists (like McPherson) blazing this new trail.

Second, what is the cure? That is, in light of McPherson’s arguments, how shall we live? McPherson’s book provides a diagnosis, but in terms of providing the antidote to excessive disenchantment, that path forward seems mostly suggestive. Perhaps part of the antidote is right in front of us—in our local communities. As Robert

Putnam noted: Americans increasingly are “bowling alone.”⁴ In our hyper-individualism, we have lost the unity that binds us together. The loss of participation in local social communities, intensified in times of quarantines, lockdowns, and hyper-isolation is pervasive in contemporary life. Staring at screens, we long for deep, meaningful relationships. Glass barriers—however necessary—are no substitute for face-to-face. That is to say, sharing in the life of a local community may join us with one of life’s deepest human values: the common good.

In addition, for those of us involved in Jesuit higher education, we might note that the recently

released Universal Apostolic Preferences list first “showing the way to God.” As an antidote to disenchantment, this includes particular practices of discernment that allow us to get in touch with one’s deepest self, the space where God speaks to us. McPherson’s argument lays bare a central shortcoming in modern virtue ethics with sharp, tight arguments, and he suggests a way forward with quotes that sparkle like gems. However, *Virtue and Meaning* is an academic work that confronts theory with theory. Nonetheless, it deserves praise for breaking hard theoretical ground. In its path, we are invited to pursue a deepened understanding of human flourishing that unites virtue and meaning. HJE

Notes

¹ David McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelean Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

³ Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbury (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 93.

⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001).