**Human limitedness and the virtues**

Symposium on David McPherson, *The Virtues of Limits* in *Cosmos + Taxis*

**Abstract**

This paper explores the theme of human limitedness and the virtues in David McPherson’s *The Virtues of Limits.* I survey some of the main themes of his discussion – including kinds of human limits and the idea of ‘limiting-virtues’ – and indicate some salient themes in some Buddhist and classical Chinese philosophical traditions. I then suggest that McPherson is too quick to dismiss forms of moral quietism and that his discussion of our limitedness rests on a latent pessimism worthy of further articulation.

**Keywords**:

Blaise Pascal famously associated the greatness of human beings with our ‘wretchedness’. We are compelled to ‘transcend limits’ according to the dictum of *Pensée* 131. What these limits are and the possibility and means of their transcendence are complicated questions. David McPherson is well-placed to tackle them – a philosopher with expertise in moral and political philosophy as it relates to a virtuous and meaningful life. He has an orienting commitment to a broadly Christian vision, but engages with Nietzsche and Marxist and Confucian philosophies, too. His expansive and existentially serious style ensures the power and significance of his latest book, *The Virtues of Limits*.

The Pascalian aspiration to transcendence is McPherson’s starting point. Alert to the risks of certain ways of pursuing that aspiration, there is a warning that this ‘limit-transcending feature’ could be our ‘potential downfall’ and a root of ‘human evils’ (p.1). Some limits are established for good reason (the highway speed limit) while others are integral to our nature. The Greek poet George Seferis said going ‘beyond the measure’ is ‘the worst thing that can befall a man’ (Seferis 1967, 57). Hubris is the price humans pay for exceeding their own proper limits. This sets up important questions: what kinds of limits are we dealing with and are they all of the same kind? Are attempts to push our limits actually impossible or achievable but unwise? Are certain limits changeable – or even changing naturally – or are they fixed by certain aspects of our nature or deep features of reality?

McPherson approaches these issues with due care and an expansive outlook. He distinguishes four kinds of limits - existential, moral, political and economic – detailed in chapters 2 to 4. They relate to kinds of ‘limiting virtues’, dispositions to recognise and respect our limits. Some, like humility, are more Christian than Aristotelian. Others include loyalty, reverence, loyalty and moderation and – in the economic realm – contentment and frugality. McPherson knows virtue by itself lacks the power to constrain our impulses to self-transcendence. In MacIntyrean spirit, he describes ‘a vision of the good life that recognises the importance of limits’ (p.4).

Such visions of the good are rarely amenable to systematic articulation. McPherson is right to indicate the general *features* of that vision – and to justify it by emphasising very familiar human needs and tendencies (our familial impulses and our limited sympathy, say). This is a strategy of rehabilitating limits – a crucial task in cultures where claims and aspirations to ‘a certain kind of *limitlessness*’ tends to impress people (p.9). McPherson does not comprehensively assay the forms and origins of this zeal for limitlessness. Instead, he helpfully presents the issues in terms of ‘existential stances’: a *choosing-controlling* stance – manifesting our impulses to change and control – and an *accepting-appreciating stance* marked by forms of restraint and recognition of value in our life and world as we find it.

The ideal is a carefully disciplined balancing of these two stances. Choosing and controlling, done with thought and care, express various distinctly human capacities (moral judgment, a sense of beauty, wise stewardship of the world). However, wisdom and prudence dictate that our engagements with the world should often take a gentler form—accepting moral realities that are unalterable and appreciating the messy richness of the social cultures inherited from our history (a clear influence of those conservative political philosophers – Burke, Scruton, and Oakeshott – admired by McPherson). Unfortunately, we now find the choosing-controlling stance entrenched within our cultures. Sources and manifestations include a ‘scientific-technological mindset’ and fixation on grand projects that betray a ‘restless attempt’ to reform the world into a utopia (pp.7, 12, 116).

I see many diverse attitudes and convictions at work in these sorts of claims. ‘Transcending’ our limits in the Pascalian sense seems integral to the human condition. It characterises human existence as such. However, displacement of an accepting-appreciating stance in favour of its muscular partner could be explained in terms of contingent social and historical developments. I sympathise with McPherson’s determination to provide a deeper philosophical anthropological narrative. Other cultural diagnosticians also tell similar stories about our inveterate incapacity to discipline our ‘cravings’ (as Buddhists say) and our impulses to impose our own parochial ways onto the world and the creatures in it (as Daoists say). Critics who dislike such anthropologically and metaphysically expansive narratives are not likely to accept McPherson’s approach.

In response one could offer two conciliatory thoughts. First, if they don’t accept his account, they should offer their own. If critics from very different cultures share congruent worries, then why not suppose they are tracking genuine parts of the human condition? Second, explanation of our dominative contemporary forms of life may feel shallow without some account of our nature as creatures. Why *do* so many of us have potent drives to impose our will onto the world even if the outcomes are often highly destructive? Why *are* so many of us prone to see moral values and established traditions as *obstacles* to overcome, rather than as essential guardrails or boundaries marking out the acceptable range of practices or habits?

To support his claims, McPherson cites many testimonies from contemporary thinkers – like Michael Sandel and G.A. Cohen – as well as the venerable writings of Nietzsche and Confucius. The interesting point is not that we often fail to act in our own interests – by pushing ourselves, others and the planet beyond their due limits. It is that we act as if our interests are the only real limits. Richard Rorty’s claim that ‘obedience’ is owed ‘only to our own conventions’ suggests the only limits are those we choose to adopt. No external constraints stand in our way (Rorty 1982, xlii). This is the antithesis of accepting-appreciating, which will mean checking, restraining and in certain cases abnegating this refusal to accept constraints on our will. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche condemn an empty ‘will to will’. Sandel laments a ‘one-sided triumph of wilfulness’ while Cohen, too, lambasts the ambition to ‘universal mastery’ as ‘repugnant’ (pp.15-17).

McPherson devotes most of his discussion to a practical question. How should one live in this world – acquisitive, hubristic, and animated by a ‘Promethean ideal’ evident in social, political, and economic arrangements (p.15)? What is the effective remedy for these collective ills? There is less emphasis on radical political solutions or social activism. Radicalism is hardly consistent with a due appreciation of our epistemic limits: the risks of failure are too big for good Burkean reasons. McPherson endorses a modest ‘politics of imperfection’ – a term taken from Anthony Quinton (p.109). Reform works best if it’s slow, cautious and respectful of organically evolved institutional and social arrangements. I wonder if some cases might *demand* radicalism. Some problems have been left too long. Some solutions arrive too late. But maybe this thought itself betrays a failure of self-limitation. As the self-styled ‘recovering environmentalist’, Paul Kingsnorth put it, ‘action is not always more effective than inaction’ (Kingsnorth 2017). Much harm is done by people sincerely but ineptly trying to *improve* the world. The well-intentioned are sometimes the most destructive.

*The Virtues of Limits* is mainly concerned to encourage the vision of contentedly self-limited and self-limiting human beings. The accepting-appreciating stance should be ‘primary’ and the choosing-controlling stance a choice made if or when the situation demands it (p.20). This is not simply a consequentialist argument based on an effort to avoiding causing needless harm. There is a stirring humanistic conviction that this will be the best kind of human life:

There is something very disconcerting about seeing everything in the given world—including humanity—as replaceable by something better. This fails to be properly responsive to what is of value in the given world and in the human condition […] and to the way in which this value commands our loyalty. This does not mean we have to think that everything is perfect in the given world and in our humanity. But it does mean that it is important that we find some things of great value that are worth preserving (p.28)

Human life succeeds when we accommodate to our various limits and live well within them. As Martha Nussbaum puts it in *Love’s Knowledge*, ‘Human limits structure ... human excellences’ (Nussbaum 1992, 378). Virtues must be rooted in the realities of human needs and dispositions. In her book, *Beast and Man*, Mary Midgley criticised polarised claims that our nature is either utterly fixed or totally plastic. It is more sensible to recognise that our complex, dappled natures delimit a range of ‘schemes of life’ into which we could fit and flourish (Midgley 1978, 68). There are many ways for human beings to live, but not a limitless range: our challenge is to identify the *wiser* ways, which presupposes our having an appreciation of wisdom and a proper conception of, and commitment to, it, none of which can be guaranteed.

The idea of *limiting virtues* means reframing certain character traits and bringing others into view. McPherson notes humility can be scorned as a negative quality—as the obsequiousness of a Uriah Heep or obtuse acceptance of an ignorance one should work to correct. Virtuous humility asks us to comport ourselves with a sense of our ‘place in the scheme of things’ (p.28). Humility must also be tempered by a proper pride in our status – which, for McPherson, flows from the ‘dignity’ we enjoy for being ‘made in the image of God’ (p.29). Alternative groundings can be offered for those without theistic commitments. For Iris Murdoch, humility involves a ‘selfless respect for reality’ which stops our picture of ourselves becoming ‘too grand’ (Murdoch 1997, 378). Humility for Daoists includes a sense of deep dependence on and ability to align our life with the Way (Dao).

McPherson notes several modes of humility. Confucius and Aristotle make our character and civic attainments conditional on membership of a tradition or *polis*. Social life means systems of etiquette and good manners which pre-structure our actions. Our life and maturation require care and protection that sustains rich dependence on others. Our bodies need nourishment and genial environments. In these cases, McPherson notes different modes of humility – the *docility* which makes us teachable; the *reverence* which relates us properly to sacrality; the *respectfulness* that precludes brutish ways of treating other people (pp. 55ff). One powerful instance of humility is acceptance of certain ‘absolute prohibitions’ (p. 62). Murder violates the intrinsic value of a life, for instance, and profanation violates sacrality. A sense that some actions should *never* be done structures the range of possible moral identities and behaviours.

Such identities will be social and communal, and here McPherson endorses moral partialism. I know and care more about certain people –my family and close friends, as is right. Confucians knew we ought to *some* care for everyone, but, also, *more* care (and richer *kinds* of care) for our intimates (the Mohists were radical, in classical China, for their impartialism). In recent history, utilitarianism and Kantianism helped establish a zeal for impartiality and its political analogue, egalitarianism. But this occluded many interpersonal limiting virtues. McPherson gives the example of *neighbourliness* – a virtue which helps us honour ‘the moral significance of proximity’ (p.73). One can help and sympathise for ‘distant strangers’. But critics will want assurances that society will be structured to support the distant and unloved, as well as our near and dear. When the Buddha called for a ‘minimal’ state, he also stipulated that one vital function was to help the ‘needy’ (see Moore 2016). Caring about everyone in the abstract, perhaps, makes it less likely to appreciate or care about those right before us.

Another virtue of partiality is *loyalty* – not in a martial sense, but the recognition of the deep significance of ‘identity-constituting bonds of attachment’ (p.77). Connections to other people can be seen as constraints – ties that bind, roots holding us down – and some of the people we are connected to are bad. McPherson does note these cases, but his discussions could have been extended (pp.81-83). A good guide here may be Confucius. In several episodes, he describes so-called ‘concealment cases’. A parent commits some offence, and their adult child has to decide how to respond. Respect for state law requires reporting the crime. Filial piety encourages concealment (see Lijun and D’Agostino 2004). Confucius refuses to provide neat solutions to these cases: there are none. Here is a double-sided vision of interpersonal life – one of compromise and tension as well as trust and cooperation.

Political limits are discussed with relation to cosmopolitanism and patriotism. They continue the theme of our limited moral capacities but in the larger political realm. McPherson argues for a definition of patriotism as the ‘loyalty to one’s country and one’s fellow citizens’ (p.84). To be patriotic means loving the *people* and the *place* of one’s home. This love is local. It reflects our sense of belonging to a particular nation with its own history and character (pp.85-86). This is an actual affection absent from cosmopolitans, the ‘world-citizens’ who even Nussbaum describes as being in ‘a kind of exile’ (pp.85-86). It was a surprise here McPherson did not invoke Roger Scruton’s concept of *oikophilia* (Scruton 2012). It expresses that love of place channelled by McPherson while, I think, adding a deep melancholic tone. Scruton – author of an ‘elegy for England’ – lamented a loss of oikophilia in contemporary societies. Such local affections seem antiquated in rapid-paced neophiliac life. Some people also seem to be undismayed by their rootlessness: they are ‘anywheres’ not ‘somewheres’. Maybe they suppress such moods or interpret *where* in narrower terms of job offers and house prices. I wonder how many people really felt a powerful oikophiliac love of place. Scruton might be one pure but rare case.

McPherson is right that patriotism need not take xenophobic forms and also correct that the popularity for cosmopolitanism is more typical in elite social groups (p.89). His own proposal is a sort of *humane localism* – living as ‘limited, placed creatures’ bound by ‘loves and loyalties’ (p.89). Localists still honour, in Kantian spirit, ‘the intrinsic dignity of our common humanity’. But their own concerns and attention are mainly confined to their own locale. I wonder if there’s space for more ambivalent possibilities. I could imagine localists who ruefully accept that their world is now thoroughly ‘global’. At the end of the *Dàodéjīng* is a sketch of a world of small villages whose inhabitants are aware of others but never think to visit them. This localist world is long gone, if it ever existed. Our world is ‘one world’ with its local customs and cuisines either bulldozed or commodified for ‘global villagers’ accustomed to having anything from anywhere at anytime.

McPherson thinks that nations can retain a sense of distinct identity. The United States can inspire patriotic loyalty through its own unique characteristics – like the Constitution or its own national story or the famous American Dream. Such structures make possible ‘regional ways of life’ within the wider national ‘melting pot’ (contrast SoCal, New England, and the Amish). But many Americans are imperilled by those same structures. In the United Kingdom, there’s huge disagreement about the monarchy ranging from angry abolitionism to shoulder-shrugging to flag-waving adulation. In such conditions the limiting political virtues are badly strained. The critic might insist that the 21st century world has no place for them. If so, then the idea of limiting virtues is as necessary as it is untenable.

One problem is that the virtues celebrated in modern political discourse are *not* the limiting ones. The ethos of political life is ambitious and energetic, passionate and fractious. Activist groups are demanding and discontented and all their goals are immense. ‘Saving the planet’ or overthrowing capitalism are hardly the goals of those attuned to their limits. Other alternatives to radicalism are available, ones quietist in their character. Oddly, McPherson defines quietism as failing to seek improvement (p.110). But this is not the quietism exemplified by the Buddha, Epicurus, Zhuāngzǐ and others. It aspires to goals of harmony and equanimity and gentle ways of life. The virtues include humility, self-restraint, calm, diffidence and reticence and the discipline needed to dial down our desires. I see McPherson as a sort of quietist – evident in his defence of moderation, appreciation of human limitedness and hostility to ‘Prometheanism’.

The historic exemplars of moral quietism are also sympathetic to McPherson’s discussions of the economic dimension of life. He defines this broadly as an appreciation of ‘home economics’ – a sense a well-ordered life that accommodates both ‘the dignity of work’ and periods of leisure and rest (p.126). Epicurus advised having a few simple, easily-attainable desires. The Buddha’sdiscourses allow one to accumulate wealth just as long as it is used to help oneself, other people and the wider community (including supporting religious communities). Zhuāngzǐ refused kinds of work – such as political office – that he knew would dominate his life and drive out music and engagements with nature. Quietism requires the wise management of the whole economy of our needs and desires and of the means we adopt for their fulfilment (including what the Buddha called ‘right occupation’).

Like these quietists, McPherson sees *greed* as a main obstacle to these kinds of life. He defines it broadly to include ‘selfish, acquisitive desire that is insatiable’ (p.127). Avarice is a greed for wealth but there are other objects of greed, too. McPherson accepts that capitalism is a ‘double-edged sword’, allowing huge improvements in material conditions while supercharging some of our most ‘reviled … characteristics’, such as greed and envy (pp.126-127). Our way of life is now dependent on competition and acquisition, and the vices which sustain them. Bernard Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees* was prescient in recognising that these vices are necessary to the existence and activity of our emerging capitalist forms of life (cf. Cooper 2023). Modern critics such as Robert and Edward Skidelsky argue in similar vein: the ‘competitive logic’ of capitalism generates new markets and increases the range of things to which money is relevant (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). Capitalism also destroys a sense of *sufficiency*: our sense that one can have *enough* and so want or need no more (pp.130-131). Otherwise, one will believe ‘enough’ is *never* enough if one is always able to get *more*. The grim outcome will be consumption without compunction or limit.

McPherson and the Skidelskys see visions of the good life as including a sense of sufficiency, including virtues of economic self-limitation. It is typical to hear defences of frugality framed in narrower terms of environmental sustainability or celebrated as part of a budgeting strategy that helps us cope with straightened fiscal climates. However, McPherson sees frugality and related virtues in deeper moral terms: intrinsically good and not instrumentally so. Like the Buddha, he warns that the ‘insatiability’ of our desires is a path to ‘perpetual discontent’ (p.134). But the economic-limits virtues have positive functions as well. The good life requires convenience and comforts but also sufficiency and safeguards to constrain our acquisitive appetites and habits. It is important to ensure that our coiled greediness cannot invade all areas of our life. In particular, we face the ‘horrifying’ prospect of the ‘kind of human wilfulness that recognises no constraints whatsoever on what one wills’ (p.142). A sense of beauty, dignity, duty and anything else that could serve to check our appetitive actions would all be destroyed by unrestrained greed.

Greed is not the only vice at work in cultures dominated by unrestrained acquisition. Michael Sandel notes the ‘meritocratic hubris’ evident in ‘winners’ who often forget the ‘good fortune’ (or governmental supports) which enabled their ascent and also feeds ‘contempt’ for the ‘losers’ (p.142). The Buddha would add envy, jealousy, and dispositions to enmity and hatred – a set of vices occluded by a narrow focus on inequality. McPherson sees cultures of greed as symptoms of neglect of a richer set of human motivations. Comfort and convenience are not *bad*, but they become so if unaccompanied by fuller suites of desire—to be ‘home-builders’, for instance, and oikophiliacs whose love of place means they do not destroy it (pp.143-144). McPherson invokes Marx’s critique of the destructive and alienating effects of modern economic-industrial systems but rejects his utopianism and view on private property. McPherson also implicitly rejects any revolutionary solutions – no workers’ uprising! But his own call is no less radical: an economic decentralisation that disperses property widely and sufficiently, checks concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, and also protects local economies (p.146). I am less persuaded that this is achievable through free markets, because these are defined too narrowly as anti-monopolist or anti-oligopolist. The economist Ha-Joon Chang notes that *all* markets incorporate rules and regulations (one can’t legally sell humans or votes). But we fail to notice them because we are inured to them (Chang 2010: ch.1). McPherson’s solution would be a regulated structure restraining market forces – itself a radicalist vision, although not in Marx’s revolutionary sense.

The mood at the end of *The Virtues of Limits* seems pessimistic and quietist. McPherson is inspired by the agrarian poet Wendell Berry’s account of the ‘unsettling of America’, which speaks of intense cultural imperatives to ‘displacement’ (pp.146-147). Homesteads surrendered to cities as impulses to expand and exploit took hold. The meaning of work changed, from providing for one’s family while contributing a little to the society to a means of fulfilling our consumptive habits. The tone of conservative lament sounds clearly in such remarks. Romantic and nostalgic visions of the past can disguise the toil and risks of earlier generations of workers. However, one can persevere through hard work if one feels it has a *meaning* – that is contributes to something beyond itself that *matters*. It is a sustaining and motivating sense of mattering that gets lost in a culture where too many people struggle in what the anthropologist David Graeber nicely called *Bullshit Jobs* (Graeber 2019).

McPherson does not offer practical means to create an economically decentralised culture. It would be pointless to do so anyway without his motivating us to want it. The book ends with his conception of humans as ‘home-seeking, home-building and home-loving creatures’ (p.14). We are natural-born oikophiliacs who should value household, family and community life, and our rootedness in local traditions within a nurturing nation state. These indicate *limits* within which human beings should create their lives. It is this sense of human limitedness that acts as a check to our impulse to self-transcendence. At the end of the book, McPherson speaks of what he calls the ‘Sabbath-orientation’ – a means for making time and space in life for intrinsically-valuable activities. Rest and contemplation do not find any natural home in an insatiable world of busy-ness and distraction.

McPherson proposes that during a Sabbath-orientation, ‘one ceases for a time from the choosing-controlling stance and instead adopts an accepting-appreciating stance toward what is of value in the given world’ (p.158). I find this attractive but feel a pessimistic undertone. How will desires for periods of contemplation and rest become strong for those submerged in a world animated by insatiability and ambition? How could accepting-appreciating stances be protected when *acceptance* of things is seen as a failing and *appreciation* becomes reduced to subjective appraisals of value? How could we loosen the grip of a choosing-controlling stance when the imperatives to *choose* and *control* are so powerful within contemporary life?

*The Virtues of Limits* offers us an expansive account of our natures as moral creatures. I find the rehabilitation of our *limitedness* and the rich defence of the limiting virtues an important and insightful complement to more familiar ways of theorising the virtues. McPherson has a ‘vision-first’ approach to philosophising which will not sate readers impatient for practical proposals. Certain philosophical visions of our condition and our place within the wider order of things can induce a sense of humility and measure (Cooper 2002). However, advocates for such visions typically emphasise tendencies which occlude or erode that perspective on human life. Some *bête noires* including scientism, technological hubris, the widespread erosion of religious traditions, and cultural tendencies which fuel our moral and epistemic arrogance. Moreover, calling on people to comport themselves within a proper sense of their moral limits seems futile within our world, where failings like banality, closedmindedness, intolerance, spiritual lassitude, and self-indulgence are now ubiquitous and entrenched (Kidd 2021). So, to end on a pessimistic and misanthropic note, I worry that the self-limiting forms of moral life being celebrated are increasingly impossible under our contemporary conditions. Hubris dominates our forms of life – ones structurally hostile to ‘a practice of humility where we seek to recognise and live out our proper place in the scheme of things’ (p.159). It is a consolation that there are still advocates of these humble forms of life and that is one welcome contribution of *The Virtues of Limits*.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Michael Burdett and David E. Cooper for insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay – and to David McPherson for genial correspondence and the ongoing inspiration of his work and friendship.

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