

PRÉCIS OF *VIRTUE AND MEANING*

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Aristotle said that philosophy begins with wonder, but I would add that it often also begins with dissatisfaction. This is true of my book *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective*, which was published by Cambridge University Press at the beginning of 2020.

I have been drawn to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics and have found much that is congenial in the revival of this tradition in the last half-century or so. However, I have also been dissatisfied with a flatness in the dominant neo-Aristotelian approach. It emphasizes an observational (or disengaged) standpoint rather than a participative (or engaged) standpoint, as seen in the stress it puts on an analogy between human flourishing and the flourishing of other living things, and thereby it overlooks many of the meanings by which we live and after which we seek. In other words, the dominant approach fails to account properly for our distinctive nature as *the meaning-seeking animal*. It has thus offered an overly disenchanting understanding of our human form of life. I seek to overcome this constriction and argue for a *re-enchanting* Aristotelian perspective; that is, I aim to give better recognition to the meanings by which we live and after which we seek. In particular, I show how our human form of life is shaped by strong evaluative meaning—that is, meaning or value that involves qualitative distinction and specifies that with which we ought to be concerned and toward which we ought to orient our lives (e.g., the higher, the noble, and the sacred).¹ There are two key features of strong values or goods. The first is the categorical feature: strong goods are normative for our desires, whether or not we are responsive to them. The second feature is incommensurability: strong goods are incommensurable with weak goods, which are good simply because we desire them.

My first step toward re-enchantment involves countering the disenchanting move—first suggested by Elizabeth Anscombe (but not ultimately accepted by her) and taken up by other neo-Aristotelians such as Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse—of denying any special realm of obligation and instead focusing on what human beings need in order to flourish, where this is understood on analogy with the flourishing of other living things. In Chapter 1, I argue that the whole realm of strong evaluative meaning—e.g., the noble, the sacred—that is revealed to us from within the engaged standpoint of our human form of life is such a special realm of obligation. While those who adopt the dominant approach do not entirely neglect the engaged standpoint, I argue that they do not go far enough in exploring this

¹ I am here developing upon Charles Taylor's account of strong evaluation.

standpoint, and thus they do not provide us with an adequate philosophical anthropology—which includes an account of the nature and extent of our differences from other animals—and along with this they do not provide us with an adequate account of our reasons for acting according to virtue. They suffer from an inarticulacy about the life of virtue because they do not adequately account for the realm of strong evaluative meaning, and for our distinctive nature as the meaning-seeking animal, and thus they offer a distorted understanding of the life of virtue.

In Chapter 2, I take on distorted understandings of the relationship between virtue and happiness (e.g., an instrumentalist understanding where virtue is seen as a best bet for happiness in the long run). I focus on different positions taken by Philippa Foot in her career. I seek to re-enchant our conception of happiness such that it is understood as a normatively higher, nobler, more meaningful mode of life that is constituted by virtuous activity done “for the sake of the noble” (as Aristotle puts it) and which can enable us to address the problem of loss in human life. According to my account, the virtues are modes of proper responsiveness to strong goods (e.g., what is admirable in our own human potential, the dignity of other human beings) and in being properly responsive they constitute for us the good life.

In Chapter 3, I take on distorted understandings of other-regarding concern among neo-Aristotelians, where the other-regarding virtues (e.g., justice, generosity) are understood as virtues primarily because of their role in promoting the good functioning of our social groups, and ultimately our own individual flourishing. I focus here on Alasdair MacIntyre’s account in *Dependent Rational Animals*. I seek to re-enchant our understanding of the requirements of the other-regarding virtues by giving proper recognition to special inherent dignity and sanctity of human life, and I show how this enables us—in a way the dominant neo-Aristotelian approach does not—to regard all human beings as fully amongst us, to affirm absolute prohibitions, and to respond properly to the demands of universal and particular concern. I argue that the other-regarding virtues should be understood as modes of proper responsiveness to the intrinsic worth of others, where we show concern for them for their own sake but where this also constitutes for us a normatively higher, more meaningful, more fulfilling mode of life.

In Chapter 4, I consider Bernard Williams’s forceful challenge that evolutionary science has done away with the sort of teleological worldview that is needed for an Aristotelian ethic, and I argue that responses to Williams from Rosalind Hursthouse and John McDowell are not adequate. I argue that we do in fact need a teleological worldview but there is no incompatibility between such a worldview and evolutionary science. My ultimate aim here is to show that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics needs to be situated within an account of the meaning of life—that is, an account of how our lives fit into the grand scheme of things in light of a cosmic or ultimate source of meaning to which we must align our lives.

This brings us into the realm of spirituality—where this is understood as a practical life-orientation that is shaped by what is taken to be a self-transcending source of meaning that makes normative demands upon us—which has been overlooked or explicitly excluded by those who adopt the dominant approach to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. In Chapter 5, I seek further re-enchantment through articulating and defending the importance of spirituality in the good life, which includes recovering an integral role for contemplation, which—despite its importance for Aristotle—has been neglected by many contemporary neo-Aristotelians who focus exclusively on the role of practical reason for living well. I discuss here two senses of contemplation. The first is equivalent to philosophizing (i.e., wisdom-seeking), and the second has to do with appreciative attention to, or a loving gaze toward or beholding of, something worthy of love and appreciation. I argue that these two senses should be regarded as connected, as the first should lead to the second, and ultimately, insofar as there is wisdom to be found, philosophy when properly practiced should lead to a transfigured vision of and appreciative attention to reality as a whole. This is important for addressing what I call the problem of cosmodycism—that is, the problem of justifying and affirming life in the world as meaningful and worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering. In this chapter, I also seek to show the attractions of a specifically theistic form of spirituality, although my account allows for both theistic and non-theistic forms.

In sum, I endeavor to articulate and defend the most re-enchanter perspective that seems to be a live option. If we are not able to affirm such a perspective, then I think this would constitute a significant loss, precisely because we are the meaning-seeking animal.²

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References:

McPherson, David. 2020. *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² This précis is an expanded version of my summary of the book for a Cambridge University Press blog: <http://www.cambridgeblog.org/2020/02/the-meaning-seeking-animal-re-enchanting-virtue-ethics/>. It is a slightly modified version of the précis for another symposium on the book in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*.