

David McPherson (Ed.), *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.) ISBN: 9781107133006. Hardcover: \$99.99.

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Through the writings of Thomas Aquinas, G.E.M. Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others, virtue theory has often seemed the gathering place for religious philosophers concerned with the good life. But philosophical writings on virtue theory or conceptions of the good life rarely explicate the specific place of spirituality and its relationship to human flourishing—often, discussions of “spiritual virtues” are separated from discussions of general human virtues. If spirituality is a part of the good life, an integral aspect of human flourishing, what would this role look like? How should an understanding of ourselves as spiritual creatures inform our notion of what it means to be human? Questions like these are what David McPherson’s edited volume, *Spirituality and the Good Life*, a collection of 12 essays by different authors, addresses. The chapters of the book touch on three different themes in succession:

1. The role of spirituality in the good life.
2. Spiritual life and practices within various religious frameworks.
3. Spirituality and spiritual practices outside of religious frameworks.

The first four essays discuss the role of spirituality in conceptions of the Good Life. Cora Diamond, in her essay “The Problem of Impiety,” discusses Hume’s argument against moral “taboos,” and argues against an “impious” conception of the world. In Robert C. Roberts’ “The Virtue of Piety,” he argues that piety is a human virtue that is to be developed; and in its developed state, this virtue looks like a “temporally stable disposition to appreciate the glory of God,” among other things. McPherson himself contributes the essay “*Homo Religiosus*: Does Spirituality Have a Place in Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?” which attempts to answer the question posed in its title. Finally, Fiona Ellis’s paper “Desire and the Spiritual Life,” examines ideas of desire from Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Aquinas, and argues that there is a kind of desire that draws us toward the values essential to a good life. After reading these essays, the reader may find that the categories of spiritual practices and human virtues seem more intertwined to her than before. Is piety a spiritual practice that is exercised like a virtue, or a regular virtue playing a special role in the spiritual life?

The next three essays, addressing themes of spirituality in various religious frameworks, begins with Mark Wynn’s, “Between Heaven and Earth: Sensory Experience and the Goods of the Spiritual Life,” which discusses one specific category of “goods” in the spiritual life: the Thomistic infused moral virtues. Samuel Fleischacker then describes the observance of *Shabbat*, the Jewish sabbath, and the importance of spiritual practices in the good life, in “The Jewish Sabbath as Spiritual Practice.” Next, in “The Power of the Spoken Word: Prayer, Invocation, and Supplication in Islam,” Mukhtar H. Ali discusses how traditional worship practices illuminate the Islamic idea of creation as “divine speech.” While philosophy of religion in the United States

tends to be dominated by those working in the Christian tradition, the import of this triad of essays can hardly be overstated. Taken together, the reader is treated to a literary comparison of traditional understandings of how spiritual practices fit into the good life, from the perspective of all three major monotheistic religions.

The final four essays discuss spirituality and spiritual practices outside religious frameworks. First, Karen Stohr's chapter, "Aristotelian Companionship and Ignatian Companionship," argues that St. Ignatius of Loyola and Aristotle share the view that friendship is an essential part of a good life. Next, in "Starting with Compassion," Richard White discusses what he calls the "everyday origin of spiritual life"—compassion—and overviews the discussion of this virtue in Western philosophy. May Sim follows with "Identifying with the Confucian Heaven: Immanent and Transcendent Dao," arguing that, contrary to its image in popular culture as a secular moral philosophy, Confucianism provides the resources for a rich spiritual life in its conception of Heaven (*tian*). And in the final essay in the book, "Agnostic Spirituality," John Houston describes a conception of Christian faith as a kind of hope, allowing one to cultivate the virtues of a Christian life even in a state of uncertainty. This final group of essays takes the insights from the first eight chapters and expands the radius, showing us the enduring relevance of spiritual virtues within a more secular sphere.

From this collection, I have chosen one essay from each of the groupings to expound on in greater detail. I have chosen to discuss the contributions of Cora Diamond, Mukhtar H. Ali, and John Houston, one essay from each of the three thematic groups which, in my estimation, are among the best essays of the volume.

Cora Diamond's chapter, "The Problem of Impiety" is divided into two parts; the first addresses Hume's argument that a non-superstitious religion would give up the belief that certain realms are "sacred" and to be kept free from human interference, and the second part discusses some contemporary responses to his conclusion. Diamond reminds us that, if Hume is right, moral taboos are nothing but the result of "human sentiment". This is what Diamond calls the "problem of impiety": "If we do not make any appeals to divine ordinances of any sort, are we then left only the alternative of allowing all of these actions, in every case in which they would appear to be conducive to human welfare?" Diamond then details four distinct approaches to understanding our "pious" intuitions, which do not rely on superstitious notions of the world or on any religious framework. Drawing on the arguments of Iris Murdoch, Akeel Bilgrami, Mary Warnock, Stuart Hampshire, and Roger Scruton, Diamond argues that it is far from obvious that we must, to avoid superstition, also avoid acknowledging the domains of life which demand piety from us.

Mukhtar H. Ali's essay, "The Power of the Spoken Word: Prayer, Invocation, and Supplication in Islam", examines three aspects of Islamic worship, and discusses how their integration into a life gives rise to distinct spiritual virtues. Ali writes that the primary purpose of "prayer" (*salat*) is "first and foremost the remembrance of God", and the physical movements involved in prayer act as a window into the theology of the Qur'an. The movements from a standing position, to a position of bowing, and finally prostration, symbolize the connection of the human, animal, and vegetative planes. Ali writes, "there is a correspondence between macrocosm, or outward existence, and microcosm, which is the human spiritual plane". The second movement of Islamic spiritual practice, "invocation" (*dhikr*), which Ali associates with

“remembrance” or “repetition” is the successful conclusion of contemplation (*fikr*). After seeking knowledge of God, the worshiper participates in invocation by dwelling in the presence of God—a closeness made possible by a repetitive “remembering”—a meditating on God’s closeness. Finally, “supplication” (*du ‘a*), the “most personal and intimate form of Islamic spiritual practice”, is a kind of direct communication with God, which differs from prayer by falling outside of specified religious guidelines. Supplication is akin to a crying out to God, either in distress or in joy, and Ali writes that the cries of the anguished—“Ah!”—are themselves a name of God.

John Houston’s essay “Agnostic Spirituality” defends the agnostic. Here, Houston aims to argue (1) that one may be an agnostic, not because they are a proverbial “fool,” but rather because they genuinely find the world to be “poker-faced”, and (2) that there is a sort of faith that can exist, perhaps even thrive, in the midst of such agnosticism. Regarding (1), Houston paints a nuanced picture of the community of agnostics, quoting sympathetic writings of such faith icons as Cardinal Newman and George MacDonald to show that agnosticism does not always look like hard-headed pride or apathy. As for (2), Houston carefully examines the biblical story from Matthew 14, in which Peter is called, in the midst of a storm, to step out of his boat and walk on water toward a figure in the waves claiming to be Jesus. Houston argues that, throughout this account, the strength of Peter’s faith lies not in the strength of his *belief* about who the figure is—rather, Peter’s faith is strong when he *acts in hope* that the figure is Jesus and that his words are true. If this is true, Houston argues, then an agnostic may be able to “cultivate a disposition that results in a practical life-orientation that affirms faith”.

In conclusion: what should the prospective reader hope to find within the covers of David McPherson’s unique volume? If it is necessary to boil the import of this book down to a single feature, it would be this: these essays narrow the gap between the “spiritual plane” and the “earthly plane”, and thereby motivates the idea that investigation into spiritual virtues should not be merely the concern of people of a particular religious tradition, or of mystics, but of everyone concerned with living a good life. This collection provides helpful nuance to the contemporary revival of virtue theory, and it deserves to be recognized for the innovative literary foray that it is.

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