

for its role in ethics. The way that accounts of practical rationality hold within them the normative challenges for agents ourselves does much good in strengthening the assertions you sometimes find in writing on virtue that make you recoil with a “Says who?” Some of the recent empirical work on virtue encourages this skepticism in me, and I imagine for nonvirtue ethicists it is even worse. Running across an overly confident moral claim can turn a person off pretty fast. Who is going to trust anyone who has figured out ahead of the rest of us what counts as ethical? But in a practical-rationality-based account like this one, everything is presented (at one point she claims that we all must take some time for ourselves, and even that itself had me doubtful) right alongside the qualification that it is to be filtered through any agent’s own practical rationality. This process is not vulnerable to our overly certain little inputs. The effect is relaxing and fruitful, as you just get prompted to think, “Time for one’s self? Well, we’ll see if that’s right.”

I am very grateful for this book’s insights and for how philosophical argumentation is used to open up explanations of what we are doing. I have shared McMullin’s definition of patience with an online group of transplant patient caretakers, who expressed great appreciation for it. Is there a better sign than that?

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McPherson, David. *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 230. \$99.99 (cloth).

David McPherson’s *Virtue and Meaning* is the engaging and provocative product of a determination to resist what McPherson sees as a very bad turn in modern intellectual life. Professional musers about value have, he thinks, been caught up in a regrettable scientific tendency to prescind from our lived experience in developing their accounts of the right and the good. They treat too lightly our experiences of ourselves, others, and the world as imbued with value and meaning, and the results are visions of the good life that are disappointingly disenchanted. These visions have the advantage of looking scientifically respectable. They don’t call on us to believe in anything supernatural or essentially mysterious. But accepting them means treating key elements of our moral phenomenology as non-veridical, and that is something we ought to hold out against if we can.

The general form of the complaint is broad and unsparing, but McPherson is particularly concerned to bring the case against his fellow neo-Aristotelians and to argue for a more thoroughly re-enchanted picture of the world than folks like Hursthouse, Foot, and MacIntyre manage to secure (McDowell comes closer to getting things right but still fails at the final hurdle). The route to re-enchantment that McPherson pursues does pass via the quintessential Aristotelian thought that the good life has everything to do with humans’ particular nature. But McPherson departs from other neo-Aristotelians in offering a new proposal about what that nature is: we are meaning-seeking animals. Meaning seeking has a threefold orientation. We seek meaning in our lives, which inevitably

and inexorably leads us to seek meaning for our individual life as a whole. But that is not all. The final element of the triplet is a concern for what McPherson calls "*the meaning of life*," the "cosmic or ultimate source of meaning" (if there is one!) to which we must align our lives (153). On McPherson's view, it turns out that our experience as individuals who seek to honor and appreciate the real goods in life can only be properly vindicated if there is in fact a meaningful and good cosmic order. Our general sense that our lives are meaningful is not insulated from facts about what is true of the cosmos. Perhaps even more troublingly, even the most stable and concrete of our moral convictions end up looking startlingly vulnerable. As a meaning-seeking being, I simply could not discover that the universe is indifferent and still carry on regarding, say, the worth of my fellow creatures in just the same way as I did before. I would be forced to abandon the judgment that I have a reason to honor their worth not grounded in any contingent care of mine.

The first chapter revisits the history of neo-Aristotelian naturalism, beginning with a particular reading of Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy." Basically, McPherson thinks that Anscombe set us up to fail. She recommends that we reflect on ordinary facts about what it would take for a human being to flourish and use those facts to ground a series of normative claims that can stand in for the now-unintelligible "peculiar" ought of theistic ethics. Taking up that (ironic) advice, McPherson thinks, will leave us unable to satisfactorily account for the authority of morality. Philosophers answered Anscombe's call with accounts of flourishing grounded in observations about our natural ends as a social species, for example, individual survival and the continuation of the species. McPherson reminds us of a familiar challenge for such views: as reflective beings, we can and do raise the question of why the natural ends for our species are ends that we as individuals ought to adopt, and it seems like the available answers are plainly unconvincing or, at best, unsatisfyingly contingent. This does not mean that we should give up on thinking of morality as intimately connected to what is good for us given our particular nature, but it does mean that we need to access a different perspective on our nature, an insider's perspective. McPherson develops a proposal about what that insider's perspective is which borrows from Charles Taylor the notion of strong evaluation. Strong evaluators recognize an array of strong goods—goods that are properly regulatory of our desires, that ground demands that are "there in any case," and that cannot be weighed against weak goods (29).

Does the notion of strong evaluation capture an inevitable and essential feature of what it's like to be a human agent in this world? It may depend on exactly how we understand the thought that we experience ethical demands or values as just being there "in any case," and that from our perspective ethical evaluations are "not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices" (29, 32). The claim that humans are by nature strong evaluators clearly excludes mere wantons from membership in the group of human agents, and that seems fair enough. But do I also fail to be a strong evaluator if, say, I apprehend ethical demands as flowing from the collective commitments of either my local community or the broader/broadest possible community of human agents, and if I regard membership in that community as nonoptional for me, perhaps because it is essential to my identity? Such a perspective does involve regarding values as normative for

my personal desires, but given the role the perspective assigns to collective choice, it is less clear whether it clears the bar for strong evaluation. Denying that people who share this outlook are strong evaluators would come at some cost to McPherson's view. Such people might be sincerely invested in the business of regulating themselves and their desires in light of thoughts about what is really valuable. If what we are after is a theory that does justice to the evaluative phenomenology of human moral agents in general, and if this is indeed a perspective that some humans have, then it would seem like a mistake to exclude this sort of perspective (one might, of course, deny that any people apprehend value this way, but the perspective doesn't seem so *recherché* that we could dismiss it as obviously not human). However, counting in this sort of perspective may also pose problems for McPherson, insofar as he aims to draw out of "our" evaluative phenomenology a commitment to an evaluative order of superhuman origin. More generally, McPherson's methodology does invite questions about the real scope of the relevant "our." How confident should we be that the experience of value he describes is the unique human experience of value? And how much does the answer to that question really matter, in the end?

The second chapter of *Virtue and Meaning* will be of interest to the growing cohort of philosophers working on the meaning of life, whether or not they count themselves as virtue ethicists. Much of the literature on the meaning of life has embraced the thought that how meaningful one's life is can vary independently of how happy or how moral one's life is. McPherson instead maintains that the happy life, the virtuous life, and the meaningful life are one and the same. As meaning seekers, we aim to organize our lives so that they are appropriately responsive to the plurality of strong evaluative goods. Being appropriately responsive to those goods means cultivating and exhibiting the virtues. When we fail to nurture and exercise these virtues, we live in a way that fails to reflect the weight and significance of the values that there really are. Our lives become "shallow" (62). As for the connection to happiness, McPherson is not at all concerned to argue that the meaningful life will be an enjoyable one. What we really are (and should be) concerned to seek, given our nature, is instead happiness understood as meaningfulness. The identification of the virtuous, the meaningful, and the happy life might seem to leave us without the resources to do justice to human experiences of loss and tragedy. However, McPherson points out that circumstances may make it impossible to adequately honor all the strong goods constitutive of happiness, with the consequence that our lives will fail to be as meaningful or happy as they might have been.

Some philosophers, motivated by worries about elitism, stick to analyzing lives' meaningfulness in terms of preference satisfaction. Others opt for hybrid claims like Susan Wolf's slogan: "Meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010], 26). McPherson shares with the latter theorists the conviction that meaningfulness emerges only when the subject relates to that which is objectively valuable in a particular way. But while Wolf allows that very many different sorts of lives can be highly meaningful, and that there is for each of us a range of meaningful possible lives to choose between, that conclusion is less readily available to McPherson. The nature, number, and relative weight of the strong goods are, on McPherson's view, not at all up to us, and

meaningfulness is achieved by arranging our lives to reflect as accurately as possible the totality of these facts about the strong goods. For each of us, then, there should be something approaching a single answer about which life will be most meaningful. McPherson does say that there is space for “a great deal of practical discretion. . . . Given the contingencies of our circumstances, including our personal proclivities and aptitudes, we have to seek through practical reason to determine how best to pursue the various strong goods that we recognize in our lives in order to shape a meaningful life” (70). But the claim that our own tendencies and abilities factor into meaningfulness just means that working out the correct answer about which life will be most meaningful will be complicated. On this picture, we still seem to have no real say in what a meaningful life for us will be (if we have no say, could I simply hand off the task of determining the most meaningful life for me to a more expert investigator?). There is little space for the thought that securing meaning in life is at least partly a creative endeavor, rather than just a matter of discerning the truth and aligning ourselves with it. Here, I wonder whether there isn’t actually some friction with the phenomenology: in seeking to build meaningful lives, do we not think of ourselves, at least sometimes and in some respects, as having some power to infuse or generate meaning through our choices?

This chapter also raises the interesting matter of the role of religious belief and devotion in a meaningful life. In later chapters, McPherson argues that we need a moral ontology to “make sense of” our moral phenomenology, and that this ontology must involve a cosmic teleology (130). On the question whether a theistic cosmic teleology is necessary, McPherson is guarded. He thinks that a nontheistic cosmic teleology could stave off the deflation of our evaluative experience, even though theistic teleology is a more attractive option. But religious conviction also figures in life’s meaning in a second sense. McPherson explains that “we need to identify those [strong goods] that are especially important. Some are especially important in that they are central to one’s overall life-orientation. For instance, the theist will believe that devotion to god is most important, and so this should certainly have a prominent place in his or her life” (69). It sounds as though McPherson is only suggesting that worship is a central part of a meaningful life for theists given their belief. But if, in fact, meaningfulness is about responding appropriately to the strong goods that there really are, and if there is a singular objective and universal set of strong goods, then McPherson must mean something stronger too—even if he doesn’t walk us right up to the conclusion. If God exists, then nontheists’ lives will be substantially less meaningful, less happy, and less virtuous than theists’ lives, all else being equal. McPherson allows that both theistic and nontheistic cosmology could support our ethical phenomenology and keep our ethics “inflated,” but even if that’s so, whether we believe in God still makes a big difference to how good we can be.

The third chapter focuses on the question of how other people figure in a meaningful life. McPherson criticizes neo-Aristotelian naturalists for failing to do justice to humans’ intrinsic worth, to their status as strong goods that we must honor through the other-regarding virtues as part of living well. Other humans just do show up for us as having sanctity, or dignity, or essentially mysterious reverence-worthiness; we see that we have reason to help, to protect, and to respect them for their own sakes. McPherson’s treatment of humans’ worth will

not sway anyone who does not already share, and trust in, this sort of moral perception, but that is not really the point, and McPherson does a nice job of marshalling support for his view from a variety of literary and philosophical sources.

The last sections of the book draw out more explicitly the connection between our efforts to live meaningful lives and questions of cosmicity. McPherson spends a good chunk of space evaluating theistic and nontheistic explanations of “fine-tuning” for life, an effort justified by the thought that “our cosmic outlook matters from within our ethical outlook” (130). McPherson parts company with fellow realist John McDowell in arguing that we cannot duck questions about the meaning of life. Our strong evaluations themselves embed a commitment to their matching real evaluative properties in the world, and if we cannot be confident that there is a cosmic source of meaning, then we cannot be confident that there are real values for our convictions to reflect.

But should we accept that facts about the nature of the universe do matter in this way? McPherson himself observes that “the normative authority of ethics, as commonly understood, seems to carry with it a sense of necessity that is at odds with seeing our ethical beliefs as radically contingent” (123). It seems to me that there is a way of taking this observation about the necessity of the normative authority of ethics especially seriously that will actually lead us away from, rather than toward, cosmic questions. Suppose someone were to say,

In believing that torture is really wrong, I am committing to condemning it always and everywhere. The ethical demand that we not torture arises directly from the facts about what torture is—it involves intentionally inflicting very great physical suffering on our fellow human beings—and the demand wants no further grounding. What must matter from the moral point of view is just the facts about torture, not general facts about whether the cosmos has a teleological order, and we ought to resist efforts to describe the authority of the prohibition as contingent on the latter sort of facts. So, my conviction will not be shaken by the results of any cosmic investigations. Tell me that the universe is indifferent, tell me even that it is evil. I will answer, “That doesn’t matter. Torture is categorically wrong. You will not shift me.”

This person has doubled down on the noncontingency of her convictions. She refuses to view their authority as hanging even on facts about how things actually are with the universe. On McPherson’s view, we are compelled to say that this steadfast agent is thoughtless or confused. She hasn’t yet understood that she can’t really mean what she says, since wrongness necessarily does refer to the cosmic order. However, we can imagine that from the perspective of an agent like this, a person who regards their ethical convictions as cosmically vulnerable might also look ethically criticizable. Our steadfast agent might think that someone who is perfectly willing to retreat to seeing their convictions as mere preferences, if it turns out that the universe is not morally and purposefully ordered, displays not an admirable scrupulousness but rather a disturbingly fragile commitment to morality. If the steadfast agent is to be charged with thoughtlessness, then, her opponent might

as well be charged with fecklessness. To be clear, my claim is not that the steadfast agent's perspective is obviously superior to the alternative. But the former perspective is, I think, an eminently human and even quite common one, and it is therefore worth taking its concern about fragility of commitment seriously.

The book concludes with some reflections on the value of contemplation and spiritual practice which push back against other neo-Aristotelians' tendency to treat these activities as unnecessary or even inimical to the meaningful life. This is an interesting and worthwhile discussion, even if not every claim seems likely to be broadly appealing—the claim that life itself will look more valuable if we think of it as a gift, for instance, won't tempt those of us who really delight in pure serendipity. The merits of these final sections reflect those of the book more generally. McPherson's efforts to describe and learn from our evaluative experience may not universally resonate, particularly with nonreligious or non-theistic readers. But *Virtue and Meaning* is throughout a thought-provoking work that raises important questions not only for neo-Aristotelians but also for anyone interested in meaningful life.

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Tadros, Victor. *To Do, to Die, to Reason Why: Individual Ethics in War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 352. \$70.00 (cloth).

I

The tide of philosophical work on the ethics of war and defensive violence has not ebbed in the past decade. It is easy to founder in this new ocean. But it can be safely said that Tadros's *To Do, to Die, to Reason Why* is the single most important published work on the ethics of defensive violence and on the "revisionist turn" in war ethics since Jeff McMahan's groundbreaking work on this topic (Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009]). Tadros's arguments are characteristic of his work: philosophically trenchant and topically germane. He pushes revisionism farther than has been done before, while taking seriously the legal and practical challenges that his suggested changes face. In doing so, he builds on his previous work—especially *Ends of Harm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)—while unhesitatingly criticizing aspects of it which he now believes mistaken. Of course, any philosophical work of this breadth and depth will face challenges—I raise a few in Section III. I begin, though, in Section II, with a chapter-by-chapter summary of Tadros's excellent book.

II

Tadros notes in the second chapter of his book that discussions in the morality of war have focused on the debate between (what I am calling) 'traditionalists'