Which Limits, Whose Virtues?

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1. INTRODUCTION

The *Virtues of Limits* by David McPherson is framed by a big picture discussion of two existential stances that we can adopt toward will-independent "given" aspects of our world, ourselves, other living things, and our lives: the choosing and controlling stance and the appreciating accepting stance. McPherson criticizes ethical views that prioritize choosing and controlling over accepting and appreciating or that simply reject the latter and adopt an unfettered choosing and controlling stance. Such prioritization shows up, for example, in a refusal to recognize will-external values that should guide or limit choice, in claims about it being good, noble, or virtuous to manifest control, mastery, or dominance over given aspects of reality, and in claims that we should or may improve or transform given things even when that requires destroying or replacing aspects of the given that have value. While criticizing all such ethical outlooks, which he associates with the mythic figure Prometheus, McPherson articulates his preferred alternative—in short, he argues that we should cultivate attitudes and traits that give priority to accepting and appreciating, not choice and control. Through a series of chapters, he fleshes out this conservative ethic by sketching accounts of specific virtues such as humility, reverence, loyalty, and contentment. These accounts are thought-provoking on their own and also give readers a rich and sympathetic understanding of McPherson's preferred conservative ethical outlook and the way it can guide humans to live meaningful and noble lives. The overall argument puts pressure on non-conservatives to articulate an alternative account that can do the same.

Many non-conservative readers will recognize and share McPherson's worries about the ethic of totally unfettered choice and control and see the need to articulate an alternative. The existence and bad effects of the ethic of power, dominance, and mastery are all too familiar from the modern West, and McPherson's objections to what we can call willful Prometheanism are both familiar and strong. Consider, for example, the *extreme willful Promethean* who completely rejects the accepting and appreciating stance. This figure, whom McPherson associates with Nietzsche, simply denies that there are any will-independent values, so he denies there are any to guide and constrain human willfulness or ethical judgment. But without any such guidance and constraint, it is unclear why willful mastery and control have any value at all. And it is also unclear how to understand or endorse claims about mastery being noble or good, since those claims about the value of successful choice and control are naturally understood as themselves positing

will-independent, given evaluative facts. As McPherson reminds us, extreme willful Prometheanism seems destined to undermine itself as a coherent ethic as it lists toward nihilism. Like many philosophers writing about and in the wake of European modernity, McPherson argues that we need to find our way back onto some sort of solid ethical ground to avoid this outcome.

One prominent option for resisting nihilism, and the ethic of unfettered mastery and dominance, is liberal individualism. McPherson discusses and rejects this in rather cursory fashion, because his main aim is to motivate and articulate an appealing conservative ethic. The basic idea is that while willful Prometheans give the choosing-controlling stance free rein (nihilistic Nietzscheanism) or at least some sort of problematic priority (liberal individualism), conservatives wisely prioritize the accepting-appreciating stance toward the given. This general account is then fleshed out through discussions of limiting virtues such as humility, reverence, loyalty, and contentment, understood as embodiments of this prioritization in various moral, personal, economic, and political contexts. The result is an impressive articulation of an appealing conservative ethic—a conservative path to a noble and meaningful life that is appealing because it suggests how we can take a hopeful stand against the modern ethic of power and domination that threatens to devolve into nihilism.

Despite its many excellences, McPherson's book is bound to frustrate non-conservatives and those of us looking for general guidance on living well in the wake of modernity.Some liberal individualists will contest the idea that they are willful Prometheans who give priority to choosing and controlling over appreciating and accepting. Others will accept the characterization but contend that McPherson's criticisms of moderate willful Prometheans are weak and underdeveloped. Still others will argue that McPherson's "two-stance" setup artificially constrains our thinking about the kinds of ethics that are available to us today.

More generally, fans of modernity who reject conservatism will note that while McPherson generously and compellingly articulates the benefits of the conservative virtues of limits, he does not consider their downsides or the bad features of extreme conservativism that give undue pride of place to acceptance and appreciation of a "natural" or "divinely sanctioned" hierarchy. It was these downsides that partially provoked the rebellion and rejection of conservatism in the modern period and that are standardly invoked to explain the appeal of extreme Prometheanism (and, for example, the benefits of industrial capitalism). So even if we restrict attention to Prometheanism and conservatism—that is, to questions about whether to take up and how to prioritize the two stances that McPherson picks out—we need a more comprehensive, generous, and honest discussion of options. For example, we would need a more generous portrait of liberalism that brings out the appeal of the liberty it promises and a more balanced portrait of conservativism that considers the symmetrical kinds of oppression and unhappy constraint it can generate, at least in its extreme forms. Then we might be able to see each moderate view as an appealing but all-too-human option and discuss them as "lovable warts and all" alternatives to the dangerous and unappealing forms of extreme conservatism and willful Prometheanism that are sadly better at drawing and revving up the crowds.

2. THE ROMANTIC THIRD WAY

The Virtues of Limits is a short book and it is packed with interesting material. So, the above comments are meant to point toward the work I think McPherson needs to undertake to make a compelling case for the ethic and the virtues of limits he favors. But since the book does not pretend to be a knock-down argument for that view, the above should not be taken as too strong of a criticism of it. Still, in what follows I want to say a bit more about McPherson's view and his case for it in light of a broader framework for thinking about the options.

My own reaction on reading the book was colored by my admiration for Charles Taylor and his nuanced criticism of both liberal individualist and conservative positions—for example the conservative positions defended in Harold Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Christopher Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven* (1991). In his Massey lectures, later published as *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor discusses the ethic of freedom or authenticity that flowered in European modernity and its tendencies to degener-

ate into relativism, subjectivism, and nihilism. He sympathizes with conservatives who reject the ethic of authenticity in order to avoid those views, but ultimately argues that their objections and worries apply to only one, degenerate version of it. In *The Sources of the* Self and other works, Taylor begins to more fully articulate the other, good version of the ethic of authenticity, which conservatives tend to ignore, and that he points to in an initial way in his Massey lectures. (You can listen to the lectures for free on-line; references to some of Taylor's relevant writings appear at the end of this essay).

I read McPherson as picking out and helping us to more fully understand the version of the modern ethic of authenticity that Taylor finds problematic and that is liable to degeneration. This is willful Prometheanism, which *valorizes* choosing and controlling the given and which demotes or rejects acceptance and appreciation. But, as Taylor emphasizes in much of his work, there is another version of the ethic of authenticity that needs to be taken into account in any comprehensive discussion of the virtues of limits. This is the ethic of romantic naturalism. In the space that remains I will aim to expand McPherson's framework to take this new option into account, and then discuss some problems that it causes for McPherson's arguments in the book.

Modernist romanticism is well known for rejecting the ethic of mastery and domination and the forms of nihilism, instrumental rationality, and unfettered capitalism that are associated with it. Like McPherson and other conservatives, the romantics saw hubris and danger in willful Promethean attempts to "play God." In *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus,* for example, Mary Shelley famously sounds the alarm about the dangers of unfettered choice and control. Romantics reject attempts to valorize willful technocratic control over the given goods of nature and suggest that things like care and creativity are good because they foster natural growth, love, and community. They are not, however, conservatives and many are atheists. So, while they think that true human goodness and virtue do involve appreciating goods that limit and guide human agency, the relevant goods and forms of guidance and control involve naturalistic and creative, aesthetic elements that are not found in conservative views. Second, romantics are not completely down on the mythic Prometheus. In *Prometheus Unbound*, for example, Percy Blythe Shelley paints a picture of an admirable Prometheus, who exemplifies courageous rebellion against "given" injustice and stultifying "given" limits. This suggests that to enable and foster new creativity and growth, we should sometimes exercise admittedly destructive choice and control in order to clear away or replace the given.

As these examples suggest, romantic moderns have an ambivalent attitude toward the given will-independent aspects of the world. They know that appreciation for will-independent goods and dialogical relationships must guide and limit the choosing-controlling stance, but they also recognize that "the given" is often bad or a source of limits that ought to be transcended and shed like an old snakeskin. It also seems that they posit a set of vitalist and communal values that cannot be fully articulated if we stick with a simple contrast between the accepting-appreciating and choosing-controlling stances. They think that the will-independent world includes living finite things that are not "given" to us in a static, permanent form. They emphasize, the value of growing and living things and the virtues that enable and foster growth, flourishing, and the acceptance or even appreciation of natural decay and death. This all suggests that the romantic modern ethic involves a third existential stance that we can call the critique and foster creative growth stance. This stance guides and limits choice and control with acceptance and appreciation of life in its growing and cyclical aspects but it also guides and limits acceptance of "the given" with an awareness that this can hamper or stunt full flourishing in humans and other living things. This option is, I think, appealing in its own right. And its availability raises some concerns about McPherson's case for conservativism and its limiting values. To make the full case for this claim and the rich discussion on this front that McPherson's book sets up would take up many pages. But in the short space remaining I will dig into one example that I think points to the more general line of argument.

3. ROMANTIC VIRTUES AND LIMITS

In chapter 1 of his book McPherson introduces his framework, offers general objections to willful Prometheans, and claims that we should prioritize accepting and appreciating the given, and begins to explore the virtues that would embody this prioritization in noble and meaningful human life. Drawing on G.A. Cohen, he argues that willful Prometheanism has many problems. We can discuss only a few, but I think my points will generalize.

As mentioned before, McPherson notes that since extreme Prometheans reject acceptance and appreciation, they are committed to evaluative nihilism and, by implication, cannot coherently maintain that their alleged virtues of mastery and control are good or noble. Moderate Prometheans (liberal individualists) are not that bad off but McPherson still thinks they are in danger of lapsing into nihilism. He makes this case with reference to Ronald Dworkin's admission that if we "play God" and genetically engineer children, the result will be a disorienting and scary change in our ways of life. Dworkin thinks that we can and should exercise admirable courage by surmounting this fear. He thinks that it would be noble, daring, and good to exercise choice and control over the genetic given, even knowing this will force us to reorient ethically and existentially to a new world in which things that were fixed and given have become flexible and subject to human whim or choice.

McPherson worries that there is a dark side to Dworkin's proposal and that if we act on it for the reasons Dworkin gives then we will end up dehumanizing children and treating them like products of our will. This would mean that we fail to accept and appreciate (i) the intrinsic equal value of human life and (ii) the value of good parent-child relationships. If so, then Dworkin's claim that it would be courageous to play God in this case is undermined. This criticism puts pressure on Dworkin to point to the values in play that are supposed to vindicate the claim about courage, but I will put that and questions about his possible response aside. I want to note that a romantic modern stance can ground a case for genetic engineering and playing God in one sense while avoiding the objections above. The romantic modern thinks that we should at least sometimes take up the controlling and choosing stance toward the given when it hampers or stunts full flourishing in humans and other living things. In principle at least, this would provide a clear rationale for some kind of genetic engineering. But unlike Dworkin, who seems to picture restraint in this domain as a form of cowardice, the romantic modern will proceed with caution and an awareness that choice and control of the given is dicey. The fictions written by the Shelleys reflect this and also the fact that successful alterations of the given must be motivated, limited, and guided by the attempt to enable and then foster new growth, creativity, and life. So, the romantic will treat genetically engineered people as intrinsically valuable living creatures, not products of will, and their whole outlook on the world will largely reflect the kinds of caring, nurturing, and loving attitudes toward new growth and maturation that are central to good parent-child relationships.

We can now begin to see how the romantic avoids and even counters the problems that McPherson diagnoses in the ethic of power and mastery. And when we then turn back to McPherson's text we can see that he too easily moves from the rejection of willful Prometheanism to the case for conservativism. For example, we might well grant his claim that Dworkin's position on genetic engineering fails to accept and appreciate (i) the intrinsic equal value of human life and (ii) the value of good parent-child relationships. But he then quickly adds in new language associated with the conservative ethic and seems to conclude that only that ethic can avoid the problems he has diagnosed. For example, he mentions that Dworkin might be stuck saying that it is courageous to treat our children as products of our will, notes that this involves a failure to appreciate the intrinsic value of children, but then slides into talk about appreciating the giftedness of children and all human life. This specific language will later be plausibly linked to conservative virtues of reverence and gratitude for the gift of human life and absolute injunctions to never kill innocent humans. As mentioned, McPherson in this way articulates an appealing and I think noble human ethic, but the point here is that we can agree with the initial criticism of Dworkin and question the conservative additions or spin. As suggested above romantic moderns would also worry about forms of genetic engi-

neering that are valued as bold acts of human power or mastery. But they would balk at talk of giftedness where that is taken to involve evaluative assumptions that are naturally at home in a theistic view and that is taken to lead, without comparative argument, to the conservative virtues that McPherson favors. Instead of gratitude and reverence for the given, they would be more likely to talk about joy and appreciation for new life and courageous and loving work that must be done to enable, foster, and support its existence and flourishing. In short, the romantics could agree with McPherson's more neutral and abstract claims about the values that willful Prometheans fail to accept and appreciate but they would characterize these values differently and posit a different set of virtues, with a more active, non-transcendent, and interactive slant. Where McPherson favors reverence, restraint, and contemplation of the good world as a whole, the romantics would favor love, engaged nurturing, and shared finite relationships that involve celebrating and accepting the natural and cyclical growth and decay of finite life.

4. CONCLUSION

The Virtues of Limits is a dense, enlightening, and creative book and connects with a larger project that McPherson has been developing. Unlike the rather pessimistic and caustic conservatives whom Taylor (1995) aptly describes as taking up "the view from Dover Beach," McPherson is exploring and articulating a conservative ethic that is positive, hopeful, and appealing. He shares other conservatives' worries about the ethic of mastery and dominance, the influence of unfettered capitalism, and the prospects for good, meaningful lives in a disenchanted Godless cosmos. But unlike them he is hopeful that we can re-establish contact with the enchanted world and live out noble and meaningful lives, guided by the virtues of limits. I think this is an inspiring project and look forward to seeing it develop, even while I worry it is not entirely realistic for reasons that drive some other conservatives toward a kind of pessimism. But my main point in this commentary is that even if McPherson's optimistic conservativism is a live and appealing option for some of us today, there are other options such as the romantic one that offer their own limits and virtues. This has been discussed only on one topic and would need to be shown in detail, but my suggestion is that the romantic option, enriched by engagement with Eastern philosophy, is well placed to ground both noble and meaningful human lives and the rejection of the willful Prometheanism that McPherson warns us about. If so, this grounds doubt about the need to adopt the conservative ethic in particular; and, given the historical work done by Taylor and others, I think that any comprehensive case for conservativism today needs to engage with that possibility.

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