Précis and Replies

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I want to express my gratitude to Leslie Marsh for hosting this symposium on my book *The Virtues of Limits* (Oxford University Press, 2022) in *Cosmos + Taxis*, and to Matthew Slaboch for making it happen through his excellent work as editor. I also want to thank all of the contributors for the honor of their thoughtful engagements with my work. In a number of cases, the contributions are the fruit of philosophical friendship and part of an ongoing conversation. I am glad for the opportunity to continue these conversations here, and also to begin new ones. Before turning to respond to each of the contributors, I want to start with a précis of the book.[1]

1. PRÉCIS OF *THE VIRTUES OF LIMITS*

To advocate for the importance of limits today is in some ways countercultural. Unlike the great traditional cultures of the past that counseled us to know our limits (and respect them), today we often hear slogans about how we should live with "no limits" or have "boundless aspirations." We are also given messages about how it is good to have "limitless possibilities." All of this is expressive of a prevalent cultural ethos that celebrates unbridled individual choice and endorses a maximizing mindset that presumes more is better. While this ethos is distinctive of our late modern age, it must also be recognized that human beings have always tried to transcend limits, whether natural or conventional, and this has often been part of how we have achieved what is best in our humanity. At the same time, this limit-transcending feature of human life has a potential for downfall, as it can lead to dehumanization. And within our culture there is also widespread discontent with the valorization of unbridled choice, and a sense that "a lack of limits can in fact limit us," especially in our capacity to live well.[2] In *The Virtues of Limits*, I explore the place of limits within a well-lived human life and develop and defend an original account of what I call "limiting virtues," which are concerned with recognizing proper limits in human life. The limiting virtues that are my focus are humility, reverence, moderation, contentment, neighborliness, and loyalty, and they are explored in relation to four kinds of limits: existential limits, moral limits, political limits, and economic limits. The four chapters of the book correspond to each of these types of limits.

On my view the virtues are modes of proper responsiveness to that which is of intrinsic value (or goodness) and which makes normative demands upon us, and in being properly responsive the virtues constitute for us the good life, that is, our human fulfillment understood as a norma-

tively higher, nobler, more meaningful form of life (see McPherson 2020, ch. 2). In a general sense then all of the virtues—e.g., courage or generosity—can be understood as having a limiting function insofar as in being properly responsive to intrinsic values—e.g., human dignity or the nobility of virtue itself in realizing what is admirable in our humanity—we recognize constraints on our desires and choices. However, the limiting virtues that I discuss recognize limits in more specific ways in relation to the four kinds of limits that I mentioned.

My account of the limiting virtues begins from a reflection on two fundamental existential stances, or orientations toward "the given," that is, what exists. One stance we can take toward the given is the choosing-controlling stance. All mature human beings adopt this stance to some extent in their efforts to improve their lives and the world around them through controlling, transforming, and overcoming the given. However, at the extreme, this stance can give expression to a "Promethean" project of "playing God" by seeking mastery over the given. The other basic existential stance is at odds with this Promethean project: I refer to it as the accepting-appreciating stance. By accepting and appreciating the given, it imposes limits on the choosing-controlling stance (see McPherson 2022a, p. 5).

While I acknowledge an important and ineliminable role for a choosing-controlling stance in human life, I argue that the accepting-appreciating stance should be regarded as primary for three main reasons. First, we need to be properly responsive to what is of value in the given world in order to know how to act (or not act). In other words, the accepting-appreciating stance should inform when and how we take up the choosing-controlling stance. Second, given the limits of our existence, we need to recognize that a state of perfection will never be realized through our efforts, and so we need a way of living with and being at home in the world amidst imperfection, which means that we need a way of coming to see life in the world as good and worth affirming despite the ill. Third, in an important sense our achievements are not in fact complete without our appreciation of them. Consider the creation story in Genesis: God creates the world in six days and then completes his creation through appreciating it—where he contemplatively beholds it as "very good"—and resting on the seventh day. The practice of the Sabbath imitates God in creation: it completes our own creative work through restful appreciation of this work as well as the world in which we live. It is therefore important to cultivate a sabbath-orientation in our lives (see McPherson 2022a, pp. 15-28, 156).

On my account, the limiting virtues help us to achieve the proper relationship between the choosing-controlling stance and the accepting-appreciating stance. In this regard, humility can be viewed as the master limiting virtue: it ensures that we recognize and live out our proper place in the scheme of things. As a limiting virtue, it is especially concerned with reining in the Promethean tendency to "play God" in seeking mastery over the given world, which has become especially prominent in the modern world and is exemplified in a certain scientific-technological mindset. The virtue of humility recognizes that some things must be accepted and appreciated as given, and not subject to human control or manipulation. It properly acknowledges our dependency on others and on the natural world, as well as on values (or goods) not of our own making for living well and meaningfully as human beings. The virtue of humility also properly acknowledges our natural, personal, and moral limitations.

The limiting virtue of reverence is concerned with being properly responsive, through reverential attitudes and behavior, to that which is reverence-worthy (e.g., human life and its sources) and which places strong constraints on our will. It is closely connected with humility because being properly responsive to that which is reverence-worthy helps to define our proper place in the scheme of things. The virtue of reverence also plays an important humanizing role within the process of character formation, which is something that has been well recognized in Confucian thought with the emphasis on reverent manners. Additionally, reverence is necessary for properly recognizing absolute moral prohibitions (e.g., against taking innocent human life). A culture that has lost a sense of reverence will be one that is prone to dehumanizing actions.

The limiting virtue of moderation likewise plays an important humanizing role within the process of character formation, which is something well recognized by Aristotle. Moderation is a limiting virtue because it is concerned with avoiding vicious extremes. Within character formation, moderation in the

form of temperance enables us not to be enslaved to animal appetite and makes us receptive to what is ennobling of our humanity. Within the political domain, moderation is also important, especially in our age of extremes, where political polarization and fragmentation abound, which leads to increased conflict and threatens the bond of political community. Moderation counteracts this and helps to preserve the bond of the political community and realize the good that is possible through seeking prudential paths of compromise (though acknowledging there are some matters about which we should not seek compromise) and cultivating civility and genuine dialogue; it is a key part of the "politics of imperfection" that I defend, which contrasts with the utopian aspirations of a politics of perfection.

The limiting virtue of contentment is the virtue of knowing when enough is enough, of not wanting more than is needed for a good life. It does not deny that we ought in many ways to seek improvement, but it acknowledges that we need to find a way to be at home in the world amidst imperfection. This requires that we cultivate a grateful or appreciative orientation toward the given world, where we begin by counting our blessings. The virtue of contentment also plays a key role in a politics of imperfection, where we seek a good enough condition, and which—at least on my version—endorses sufficientarian justice, where what is important is that people have enough to live well. Additionally, the virtue of contentment is important for counteracting the vice of greed and for realizing a "home economics" that seeks to recover something of Aristotle's idea of oikonomia as centering on the home (oikos), but also contributing to the common good of the particular communities to which one belongs. It recognizes that we need a way of living our economic life that contributes to our being properly at home in the world, rather than causing alienation.

The limiting virtue of neighborliness is a form of human solidarity that recognizes the moral significance of proximity. It stands opposed to impartialist moral theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism, which do not recognize the moral significance of proximity. While it has been overlooked or disregarded by such moral theories, the virtue of neighborliness has had a prominent place in Western culture due to the influence of the biblical teachings regarding love of neighbor. As we see in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbor whom we are to love is not just someone who lives nearby and who is part of our community, but anyone—including strangers—we encounter face to face. This focus on concrete rather than abstract humanity should inform how we think about our duties of assistance. It should also inform how we think about the bonds and bounds of political community: we should embrace a form of patriotism connected with a humane localism, which recognizes the dignity of our common humanity but also acknowledges the placed nature of our lives.

When we love and care for those who are there in our lives, we will form identity-constituting bonds of attachment with some of these particular people and will come to recognize demands of loyalty to them that sustain the good of the relationship and that give grateful recognition to the good we have received from them. The virtue of loyalty is a limiting virtue that expresses proper partiality, and thus it places limits on the extent of our attachments and how far we can be expected to go in pursuing impartial concern. It involves binding attachment that is maintained through thick and thin, which includes loyalty to friends and family as well as loyalty to one's country and fellow citizens. It is also important to embrace what I call "loyalty to the given," which recognizes that the given world places demands upon us for loyalty, and we fail to be properly responsive to existing value by refusing to belong to the given world. Such loyalty to the given provides the wider context in which more particular loyalties find their proper place.

2. REPLIES

Now, with this account of the limiting virtues in place, I want to turn to respond to the contributors of this symposium. I will begin with Nick Smyth's essay. I do so, in part, because it is the most strongly critical, and it is good to start with a bang. But more importantly, I want to begin with Smyth's essay because it misconstrues my arguments in the book in significant ways, and I want to set the record straight right away.

Smyth's essay opens on a conciliatory note with a charming anecdote about his three-year-old son being in the habit of collecting plants on their morning walks and making "bouquets" of them, even though

some are weeds. Smyth remarks that the sort of "wide-eyed astonishment at reality" expressed by his son is "an arresting thing for an adult to see, because most of us so long ago lost the ability to encounter the world in this way, as just containing intrinsically and unqualifiedly wonderous things." Instead, we make evaluative distinctions—e.g., between flowers and weeds, and among various kinds of flowers—and this makes possible a critical posture that is essential for being well-functioning adults, but which also causes us to no longer feel at home in the world in the way a young child does. Reflecting on his son's way of encountering the world, Smyth confesses to questioning, in a "Rousseauean mood," whether "the age of three isn't in fact the pinnacle of human flourishing and happiness," and therefore whether adulthood isn't "a lesser mode of existence." In light of these reflections, he says he has been drawn to my work because he sees me as trying to do something that is rare among academics, namely, "to inject some of this capacity for wonder and appreciation back into social theory."

Unfortunately, Smyth thinks that my concrete moral and political project, which is rooted in this capacity for wonder and appreciation and given expression in *The Virtues of Limits*, does not work. More specifically, he thinks that I oscillate between "two incompatible conceptions of what counts as adopting an affirmative stance toward reality": the first he calls the "automatic" conception, which "calls upon us to affirm reality as it is, to accept and appreciate our lives and the world in which we live"; the second he calls the "selective" conception, which "calls upon us only to affirm the parts of reality that are actually valuable, that is, to accept and appreciate the value that actually exists in the world." The second conception is uncontroversial, but Smyth thinks it does not serve to distinguish my position from others. The first conception, by contrast, is problematic because it involves ignoring much that is bad and should not be affirmed. Otherwise put, following his opening anecdote, the suggestion here is that I am failing to distinguish the "flowers" from the "weeds" in our moral and political lives, and one might infer that he is also suggesting that I am therefore failing to take a properly adult stance toward the world in (supposedly) not facing up to what in it should not be affirmed but combated.

This would be bad, if it were my position, but in fact it is not. I do not endorse what Smyth calls the automatic conception of affirming reality. I endorse a kind of affirmation of the world *as a whole*, but it is anything but automatic; rather, it is a spiritual *achievement* made possible by an orientation to discover what is in fact good in the world. And it does not ignore evil and suffering, but instead it seeks to affirm the world *in spite of* the evil and suffering it contains, while at the same time working for improvement. Smyth goes wrong because, oddly, he does not engage with the three reasons that I gave for regarding the accepting-appreciating stance as primary (which are discussed in Chapter 1 and then reiterated in the final section of the book), and so this makes his portrayal of my views seem like a straw man construction.

To begin with, he wrongly characterizes the two basic existential stances—the choosing-controlling stance and the accepting-appreciating stance—as exclusionary when they are not, since he thinks this is entailed by saying that the accepting-appreciating stance should be regarded as "primary" or "more fundamental" (Smyth actually says that my position is that this stance "ought to generally take priority," but that is not how I put it). This leads him to think that I must endorse the automatic conception of affirming the world. I am clear, however, at the outset of Chapter 1 that "[all] mature human beings adopt [the choosing-controlling] stance to some extent in their efforts to improve their lives and the world around them through controlling, transforming, and overcoming the given," and thus I acknowledge "an important role for a choosing-controlling stance in human life." It is "at the extreme," when the choosing-controlling stance gives "expression to a 'Promethean' project of 'playing God' by seeking mastery over the given," that it is "at odds with" the accepting-appreciating stance (McPherson 2022a, p. 5).

My contention is that the choosing-controlling stance needs "to be informed by a proper accepting-appreciating stance" (p. 15). As noted earlier, the first reason I give for regarding the accepting-appreciating stance as primary is that "we first need to appreciate what is of value in order to know how to act or not act. In other words, the accepting-appreciating stance should inform when and how we take up the choosing-controlling stance" (p. 20).[3] Here accepting-appreciating is equivalent to proper receptivity and responsiveness to what is of objective value, and it does not rule out seeking improvement in the world, but rather, it

should inspire it: for instance, through properly responding to human dignity we are inspired to combat what threatens it and to promote human well-being. This contrasts with a Promethean view (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche's) that makes the choosing-controlling stance completely dominant by not recognizing anything in the given world as being of intrinsic value such that it places constraints on our desires and choices. Such a view, I argue, courts nihilism:

> [If] we come to see everything as up for grabs, where there are no ends or objects of choice of great importance such that they can place constraints on our choices, then this will deflate our sense of the importance of choice; we are left with a disenchanted view of the world and … 'a new disquiet' assails our desires: why desire anything? … [When we recognize no intrinsic value] then we can come to find that we have *nothing to will*. We may, of course, still will on the basis of what we happen to desire, but as meaning-seeking animals we seek to orient our lives toward what is objectively meaningful (or valuable) and worthy of our appreciative attention. We can step back from what we happen to desire and ask why these desires *should matter* to us, and if we are left with nothing to say about their objective importance, then this will deflate our sense of the importance of what we desire, and thus we may find ourselves with nothing to will. Therefore, if we are to ensure avoiding such a debilitating condition, we must regard an appreciative stance toward the given as being more fundamental than any choosing stance. In other words, an appreciative stance toward what is of intrinsic value in the given world provides the necessary background against which genuinely significant choices can be made (pp. 24-5).

Even if we recognize some things of intrinsic (or objective) value, but regard everything as potentially replaceable by something better, as we see in discussions advocating for genetic engineering, and so do not recognize any existing value that commands our loyalty, then we will still have a threat of nihilism, that is, that nothing really matters (see pp. 27-8).

After characterizing my position as maintaining that the two existential stances are exclusionary and as endorsing an automatic conception of affirming reality, Smyth says that he is sure I will "want to say": "I have never said that the choosing-controlling stance ought to be banned. I merely said that it shouldn't enjoy *primacy*. And this position is grounded in what you are calling the *selective* conception of the accepting-appreciating stance, which calls upon us to discover what is good in the world *before* proceeding to change things." Not only might I "want to say" say this, but in fact *I do say this*, and so again it is strange that he would characterize my position as he does. For Smyth, the problem then is that he thinks "we are *all* selective appreciators," and so he does not know with whom I am arguing. But again, this is because he does not properly characterize my view. As already indicated, with regard to my first reason for seeing the accepting-appreciating stance as primary—that we first need to appreciate what is of value in order to know how to act or not act—I am arguing against Promethean views that either do not recognize anything in the given world as being of intrinsic value such that it places constraints on our will or do not recognize any existing value that commands our loyalty, and thus make a choosing-controlling stance toward the given world dominant.

Smyth also fails to acknowledge and engage with my second reason for regarding the accepting-appreciating stance as primary: "given the limits of our existence, we will never actually realize a state of perfection through our striving, and so we need a way of living with imperfection, that is, we need a way of coming to see life in the world as good and worth affirming despite the ill" (p. 21). What I am seeking to address is what I call "the problem of cosmodicy," which is the problem of justifying life in the world as worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering, and it is an important concern throughout my work (see pp. 20-2). Clearly, to recognize this problem is to recognize that not everything is well in the world. I also note that Promethean projects—I focus on Nietzsche and Ronald Dworkin in Chapter 1—are concerned with addressing the problem of cosmodicy in their own way through striving for improvement. While I affirm that we should strive for improvement, I contend that this is not enough, given that a state of perfection will

never be realized. And, so, we must find a way of being at home in—or at peace with—the world amidst imperfection, which we cannot do through restless striving. In other words, we need a primary place for the accepting-appreciating stance in addressing the problem of cosmodicy. The aim here is to affirm the world *as a whole*, where life within it is seen as meaningful and worthwhile, and to do so *in spite of* the evil and suffering it contains. Accomplishing this aim is anything but "automatic," rather, as stated earlier, it is a spiritual *achievement* made possible by an orientation to discover what is in fact good in the world. That it is an achievement is indicated by my talk about *finding a way* to be at home in the world amidst imperfection.

The virtue that I identify and discuss as particularly important for this task of becoming at home in the world amidst imperfection is the limiting virtue of contentment, which, as described earlier, is the virtue of knowing when enough is enough, of not wanting more than is needed for a good life. It does not deny that we ought in many ways to seek improvement, but it acknowledges that we need to find a way to be at home in the world amidst imperfection.

Indeed, as noted in the précis, the virtue of contentment plays a key role in what I call a politics of imperfection, where we seek a good enough condition, and which I also connect with a sufficientarian account of distributive justice, where what is important is that people have enough to live well. In other words, it is important in our society to work toward overcoming the sort of poverty that makes it difficult to live decent, flourishing human lives. The specific means we take to ensure this will be a matter for prudential judgment, though it seems that it should involve some combination of law-governed markets (where people can work to meet their needs), government assistance, and personal charity. In addition to leaving this open ended, I also don't try to specify an exact sufficiency standard, because it will be situation dependent to some degree, but also because my main focus is on contrasting the sufficientarian conception of distributive justice with a luck egalitarian one that seeks to equalize inequalities that are due to luck. The key point here is that whereas sufficientarianism is compatible with seeking to become at home in the world, luck egalitarianism is not because it engages in what David Wiggins calls "a metaphysical crusade against contingency," which means being perpetually alienated from the world (Wiggins 2006, p. 306).

Now, Smyth thinks I am committed to $75,000 as a standard of economic sufficiency because in the chapter on economic limits I note: "Empirical data on reported happiness suggests that above a certain point (in the United States that point is generally around $75,000 in household income) the correlation [between income and happiness] is weak, though impoverishment does affect one's happiness negatively. What seems to matter for happiness, then, is that we have enough" (McPherson 2022a, p. 136). But I do not in fact put forward $75,000 as an economic sufficiency standard, because, again, what is sufficient is going to be context dependent (note: sufficientarian justice is not just concerned with income, but also social status, access to health care, basic rights and liberties, etc.). In any case, Smyth thinks that I am committed to a view according to which "a huge chunk of the American population does not have enough," and to address this would require a redistribution project that "would be revolutionary, almost unprecedented in American history." In other words, he thinks my sufficientarian account of distributive justice is much more radical than I acknowledge. But I don't think the amount of impoverishment is in fact as much as he is suggesting. Furthermore, he seems to assume that the only way to address poverty is through government-orchestrated redistribution, but, as I note in the book, nothing has done more to lift people out of poverty than free markets, and so endorsing a free-market economy is a requirement of sufficientarian justice. At the same, we also need to provide basic social safety nets to help people out when they fall on hard times, and we should have an important role for charitable giving.

Regardless of our assessment of the current state of impoverishment, we should acknowledge that there is always room for improvement, and the main question Smyth wants to raise here is: "in what sense does [sufficientarian] justice flow from anything like *contentment*, or indeed from any accepting-appreciating stance more generally?" He goes on to say: "Contentment arrives on the scene *after* the standard has been met, not before." Regarding his question, I don't think it is right to say that sufficientarian justice "flows" from contentment; rather, it flows from a proper recognition of human dignity. But recognizing contentment as a virtue should inform our conception of justice so that what we are seeking is sufficiency. But

does this mean that we can never be content until everyone has enough? In one sense yes: we should desire to overcome impoverishment as far as possible, and work to support this goal where we can, including through charitable giving and supporting prudential anti-poverty public policy. But in another sense, we are not required to live in a state of perpetual discontent until every problem in the world has been solved: after all, the virtue of contentment is the virtue concerned with finding a way to be at home in the world amidst imperfection and efforts of seeking improvement. This requires that we cultivate a grateful or appreciative orientation toward the given world. Indeed, as Cheshire Calhoun describes it, the virtue of contentment is a "virtue of appreciation," that is, it is a virtue that gives a proper place to an accepting-appreciating stance toward the given world amidst imperfection (Calhoun 2017, p. 344).

There is a place for discontent in human life, which leads us to seek improvement, but "[what] matters for the virtue of contentment is that we have a disposition to appreciate what is good in the given world" (McPherson 2022a, p. 36) and that we have "expectation frames that enable such appreciation" (Calhoun 2017, p. 327). I develop this idea of expectation frames through appealing to G. A. Cohen's discussion of the deeper wisdom that can be found in the common saying about how we can see the glass as either half full or half empty, which he had previously considered banal. Cohen writes:

> When we say [the glass is] half-full, we celebrate what we have. Instead of measuring what we have by some ideal, which leads to half-empty, we measure it from base 0, and then all goods are boons … [What's] good is, often anyway, good enough, … it [is] wiser, often, to satisfice than to maximize … [This is] because your life is at least half-empty if you measure what you've got by what you might have and more than half-full if you take every boon as a boon, as part of what some think of as God's bounty. What one might call true religion celebrates life, and the world, and looks for the good in everything (Cohen 2013, p. 206).

Rather than saying that "all goods are boons," a more familiar way of speaking is to say that all the good things in our lives can be experienced as "gifts." This has important implications for our becoming at home in the world. As Michael Hauskeller notes:

> Seeing the good in what we have got, i.e., appreciating the giftedness of life, helps us feel at home in the world. It creates a bond, connects us to the rest of the world, which then no longer appears hostile and forbidding, an alien place that may perhaps be best described as enemy territory. The drive to mastery and the denial of giftedness affirm this enmity. They reinforce an almost Manichaean point of view, according to which it is either "us" (the Promethean, nature-defying, boundary-transgressing, star-reaching human) or "them" (nature as the evil power that prevents us from rising to the stars where we belong) (Hauskeller 2011, p. 74).

The suggestion here—which is correct in my view—is that the Promethean project of mastery encourages us to see the world as hostile ("enemy territory") and therefore causes existential alienation, whereas a disposition that "looks for the good in everything" (which Cohen calls "true religion") enables us to become at home in the world. Of course, the world does appear as both hostile and hospitable in different respects. But the crucial point about the virtue of contentment concerns our orientation toward the given world:

> We can state what is at issue here in terms of the following question: is our basic outlook on the world as it is centered on affirmation or repudiation, yes-saying or no-saying? These are not mutually exclusive options, but the question concerns the emphasis of a particular outlook. The content person who is at home in the given world—in contrast to the discontent person who is alienated from it—is fundamentally affirmative: there is an emphasis that the world, as it is and despite the evils and imperfections it contains, is meaningful and worth affirming, that is, the given world as a whole is good and is a source of joy and fulfillment, even if not everything about it is good and

> even if there are ways, whether minor or major, that it should be made better. The person with the virtue of contentment first seeks to count his or her blessings, to take stock of what is good about the given, before figuring out how to make it better. In other words, there is an emphasis on gratitude or appreciation (McPherson 2022a, pp. 38-9).

Again, making our way to an affirmation of the world as a whole and becoming at home within it in spite of the evil and suffering it contains is a spiritual achievement, rather than something automatic. But if we fail to attain it, then the alternative is existential alienation.

As we saw earlier, Smyth confesses to questioning, in a "Rousseauean mood," whether "the age of three isn't in fact the pinnacle of human flourishing and happiness," and therefore whether adulthood isn't "a lesser mode of existence." In other words, it seems that Smyth sympathizes with those who long to return to an Edenic state of innocence and harmony, which existed prior to the loss of innocence and harmony that goes along with our emergence into the moral and spiritual self-consciousness of adulthood. But I do not think we should aspire to return to a prelapsarian condition, that is, to a state of childlike innocence, since to do so would be dehumanizing. As G. W. F. Hegel puts it in his philosophical reading of the Garden of Eden story:

> Childlike innocence no doubt has in it something fascinating and attractive: but only because it reminds us of what the spirit must win for itself. The harmoniousness of childhood is a gift from the hand of nature: the second harmony must spring from the labour and culture of the spirit. And so the words of Christ, 'Except ye become as little children,' &c., are very far from telling us that we must always remain children (Hegel 1975 [1830], §24).

Hegel does not explain this remark from Christ, but this is how I think it should be interpreted: rather than telling us that we should literally remain as children, Christ is teaching us about the importance of childlike receptivity; as he goes on to say, "whoever is humble" like a child is "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). Hegel himself places the emphasis on human effort (or "labour") in the quoted passage rather than receptivity—elsewhere in this discussion he remarks: "if [work] is the result of the disunion, it is also the victory over it"—but my argument has been that primacy should be given to receptivity—i.e., to the accepting-appreciating stance—for our becoming at home in the world, which Hegel calls the "second harmony." This second harmony is a higher harmony than the first harmony of childhood precisely because it is achieved in a fully morally and spiritually self-conscious way.

Now, Smyth ultimately does not want to remain in the "Rousseauean mood." Instead, he ends up endorsing something close to Hegel's view in advocating that we should see ourselves as "homemakers." As he puts it: "human beings belong to the wide class of creatures who naturally engage in niche-construction, since our essential nature directs us to 'control, transform, and overcome the given' in order to *make* a home in the world … This vital form of constructive activity is paradigmatic choosing-controlling behavior; it is part of our nature and it is impossible to imagine any of our lives without it. We are homemakers, essentially so."[4] Smyth regards this as a Promeathean project, but he seems to think any form of adopting the choosing-controlling stance is a kind of Prometheanism, as his next few paragraphs indicate. But this is not how I understand Prometheanism: it involves making the choosing-controlling stance dominant in seeking unlimited mastery over the given world (or something close to it), which means not recognizing anything in the given world as being of intrinsic value such that it places constraints on our will or else not recognizing any existing value that commands our loyalty.

I fully accept the idea that we have to *make* our home in the world. However, as we have seen, my argument is that this needs to be informed by an appreciative stance toward what is of value in the given world. Furthermore, we will never be at home in the world if we cannot find a way of living with and being at peace with imperfection, even amidst our efforts of seeking improvement, and this requires finding our way, through appreciative attention to what is good in the given world, to an affirmation of the world as a whole

despite the evil and suffering it contains. Finally, there is a third reason I give for regarding the accepting-appreciating stance as primary, which Smyth also ignores, namely: "our achievements themselves are not really complete without our appreciation of them." As mentioned in the précis, we see this illustrated in the creation story in Genesis: God creates the world in six days and then *completes* his creation through appreciating it—where he contemplatively beholds it as "very good"—and resting on the seventh day. The practice of the Sabbath imitates God in creation: the Sabbath—which can be understood as a kind of leisure—completes our own creative work through restful appreciation of this work as well as the world in which we live, and it thereby enables us to feel at home in the world. The last section of *The Virtues of Limits* makes a case for the importance of cultivating a sabbath-orientation in our lives.

I now want to turn to respond to Brad Cokelet's comments. Cokelet advocates for what he calls "the ethic of romantic naturalism," which he positions between what he describes as my "conservative"[5] outlook that gives primacy to the accepting-appreciating stance and the Promethean outlook that makes the choosing-controlling stance dominant, and he thinks it presents important challenges to both.[6] Romantic moderns, he notes, "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." Furthermore, Cokelet thinks that their conception of the given is more vitalist and dynamic than I allow, and so 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." According to Cokelet, this means they endorse a third existential stance that he calls "the critique and foster creative growth stance," which "guides and limits choice and control with acceptance and appreciation of life in its growing and cyclical aspects but … 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."

The problem is that I am not sure this Romantic outlook is really an alternative to the sort of view that I articulate and defend. In fact, if I am asked to side with one of the major streams of thought within modernity it would be with what could be called the Romantic stream. Following Charles Taylor's work (which Cokelet also cites and finds inspirations in), we can identify two broad streams of modern moral and political thought (see Taylor 1989). The first is the dominant Promethean stream, which takes a number of different forms, where the Promethean element can be expressed to varying degrees. We see this in Francis Bacon and René Descartes, with their rejection of Aristotelianism—especially Aristotelian teleology—and their advocating for our becoming "masters and possessors of nature" through modern science and technology in order to "relieve and benefit the condition of man." Such an aspiration can also be found in one of the two major Enlightenment moral philosophies, utilitarianism. The other major Enlightenment moral philosophy, Kantianism, also tends in a Promethean direction with its emphasis on individual autonomy. And the political philosophy of liberalism has defenders in both the utilitarian and Kantian/social contract traditions (see, e.g., John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and John Rawls' *Political Liberalism*), and it tends in the same Promethean direction. Lastly, while Nietzsche is critical of liberalism, humanitarianism, utilitarianism, and egalitarianism because of what he regards as their levelling tendencies (obstructing the human aspiration to greatness), nevertheless, he is arguably the most extreme advocate of modern Prometheanism in advocating that we should transcend the "human, all too human" and aspire to a god-like greatness through the will to power.

The other major stream of modern thought has been a response to the modern experience of alienation (from self, others, and the natural world) and disenchantment (understood as a perceived loss of objective value) brought about by the dominant Promethean stream of modern thought, and this other major stream has typically been associated with Romanticism. It has sought to overcome alienation from self, others, and the natural world, and it has advocated for re-enchantment through an engaged posture of receptivity and proper responsiveness to the values that are present in the world around us. Sometimes Romanticism has also gone in a Promethean direction with celebrating authenticity and the powers of human creativity—

such are the pressures of modern life! But much of it has been anti-Promethean, and broadly speaking, the project of *The Virtues of Limits* can be situated within this stream of modern thought that seeks to overcome the modern experience of alienation and disenchantment. It is also worth noting that many modern conservatives have been seen as Romantics, including Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, François-René de Chateaubriand, Simone Weil, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Roger Scruton, among others.

Regarding the specific points that Cokelet makes to distinguish his Romantic naturalism from my position, I would again say that I am not sure there is as much difference as he suggests. I share the "ambivalent attitude toward the given will-independent aspects of the world" that Cokelet finds in Romanticism, which is why I see our task as seeking to find the good in the world, not only in order to know how to act (or not act), but also in order to become at home in the world despite the evil and suffering it contains. The concern with becoming at home in the world I take to be a kind of "Romantic" concern, though I am not sure to what degree Cokelet shares it. No doubt we might also have some disagreements in the details about the goods to be appreciated and the bads to be avoided or fought against (but not that many I think).

Cokelet's other main point is that he thinks the Romantic naturalist conception of the given is more vitalist and dynamic than I allow. I am not committed, however, to a static conception of the given, as might seem to be suggested here. As an Aristotelian, I fully affirm "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," and indeed I don't know what it would mean to do otherwise. Perhaps this wasn't emphasized enough in the book, but I do say, for instance, with regard to what Wendell Berry calls "the nurturer stance" (as contrasted with "the exploiter stance") that it "can be seen as following from a proper accepting-appreciating stance toward the given world: when we properly appreciate something (or someone), we want to protect, preserve, and nurture it (or him or her)"(McPherson 2022a, p. 147; see also pp. 18-20). Affirming the good of living things must necessarily mean affirming the importance of promoting their flourishing and doing so when appropriate. What I oppose are the transhumanist attempts to overcome the givenness of our humanity through genetic engineering, since this fails to be properly responsive to the way in which existing value demands our loyalty, and I don't think it satisfactorily addresses the problem of cosmodicy discussed earlier.

Perhaps the chief difference between Cokelet's position and mine is that he frames his position as one of Romantic *naturalism*, which rejects theism and seeks to remain entirely within what Taylor calls "the immanent frame" (Taylor 2007, ch. 15), whereas my position is friendly to theism. I don't explicitly argue for a theistic view in *The Virtues of Limits*, but certainly the limiting virtues that I discuss—especially humility and reverence—make sense within a theistic framework. I do discuss the human draw to transcendence and make the case for a theistic view in my previous book, *Virtue and Meaning*, and in my current book project, *Spiritual Alienation and the Quest for God*.

Let me now turn to a concern raised by both Matthew Slaboch and Ian James Kidd: they are sympathetic with my project in *The Virtues of Limits* but are concerned about feasibility. Indeed, Slaboch worries that despite my explicit avowal of anti-utopianism my advocacy of limits may in fact be utopian in our present age because it is not likely to be democratically popular. Recalling what I said in the précis, there is a reason why the slogan "No Limits" is popular today, whereas "Know Limits" is not. As Slaboch notes, politicians win elections not by preaching restraint or sufficiency but rather by "promising the moon." And, so, he asks: "if we cannot realistically expect politicians to run on an agenda of modest ambitions, nor voters to clamor for such a campaign, then whom is McPherson trying to convince of what?"

This is a fair question. First of all, it should be said that there is a personal element in writing a book that articulates a vision of the good life: one hopes to get clear on one's own sense of what is important and thereby become empowered to live more fully in alignment with it.[7] But I also hope others will find this vision compelling, and a key part of the motivation for writing the book is that I believe it offers a vision of the good life centered on a recognition of the need for limits and the limiting virtues that is true and yet neglected today. Indeed, I have already acknowledged in the précis that advocating for the importance of lim-

its is in some ways countercultural. I also remarked, however, that within our culture there is widespread discontent with the valorization of unbridled choice, and a sense that "a lack of limits can in fact limit us," especially in our capacity to live well. So, I do expect that my message will be attractive to many people. The key reason why I think my vision of the good life is realistic rather than utopian is because we cannot live well without a proper acknowledgement of limits, and given that human beings want to live well, sooner or later they will have to properly acknowledge a role for limits in their lives. As for campaign slogans, I won't pretend to be someone who can give advice on such matters, but I imagine there are some good, attractive slogans that could be connected to what I argue for in the chapter on political limits: patriotic belonging, humane localism, sufficientarian justice, and combating polarization. In other words, we can focus on the goods that the proper recognition of limits makes possible. After all, a key message of the book is that recognizing proper limits is not simply a no-saying, but more fundamentally it is a yes-saying to the goods this recognition makes possible.

Slaboch also points out that while I advocate for political moderation, those regarded as moderates today are "neoliberals" on both the left and right who "seem precisely of the sort *least* animated by the [limiting] virtues," particularly because they seem to be above all committed to using government as a vehicle for economic growth. While they may agree with me in seeking to avoid totalitarian forms of government (whether communist or fascist), they disagree with my advocacy of economic limits as expressed in my vision of "home economics." To recall what I said in the précis, here I am seeking to counteract the greed implicit in the ideal of unlimited economic growth and to recover something of Aristotle's idea of *oikonomia* as centering on the home (*oikos*), but also contributing to the common good of the particular communities to which one belongs. The aim here is to live our economic life in a way that contributes to our being properly at home in the world, rather than causing alienation (not-at-home-ness). Slaboch picks up on the fact that I am most conscious about this economic vision being seen as utopian, and so I remark: "this vision is not utopian, because it has been realized throughout human history, including in the modern world, though increasingly less so, it seems" (McPherson 2022a, p. 155). But Slaboch strikes a much more pessimistic notes when he retorts: "I am less convinced that this rendering of politics is non- or anti-utopian. Something's having once existed does not necessitate its appearing again." He is certainly right about this, though it does show it is not *impossible*. In fact, what is impossible is the sort of unlimited growth championed by neoliberals given finite resources. As Christopher Lasch notes, neoliberal progressive optimism "rests, at bottom, on a denial of the natural limits on human power and freedom and it cannot survive for very long in a world in which an awareness of those limits has become inescapable" (Lasch 1991, p. 530). Berry gets at something similar when he says that it is "less a choice than a necessity" to oppose the enterprise of unlimited economic growth. But he also notes that allegiance to a home-oriented form of economic life that affirms the importance of economic limits is "not a conclusion but the beginning of thought," since it will require practical wisdom to discern how best to realize it as far as possible within the circumstances of each of our lives (Berry 2012, p. 18).

One point of clarification about political moderation: my position here is not the same as being a centrist with regard to a left-right political spectrum; rather, my concern is with combating political polarization and fragmentation, which threaten the bond of the political community and the goods it makes possible. My advocacy of political moderation is an extension of my defense of the virtue of moderation more generally as a limiting virtue concerned with avoiding vicious extremes, and it is also an expression of my embrace of a politics of imperfection, where we must acknowledge that political conflict will always be with us, and so we must find prudential paths of compromise (though, as I said earlier, I do not deny that there are some matters on which we should not compromise). As I put it: "What political moderates are committed to is an ethic of dialogue and civility: they seek to communicate across differences of view in order to find common ground; they seek to do so respectfully, charitably, and with an open mind; and they see promoting and embodying this ethic of dialogue and civility as a way of preserving the bond of political community in the face of continued disagreement" (McPherson 2022a, p. 120). The challenge is to do one's best

to "bring out the good and avoid the bad in a situation where people often make different judgments about the nature and extent of the good and the bad" (p. 121).

Turning now to Kidd's concerns about feasibility, he remarks: "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 concludes on "a pessimistic and misanthropic note"—"misanthropic" in his sense of involving a "systematic condemnation of the moral character of humankind as it has come to be" (Kidd 2021, p. 27), rather than in the literal etymological sense of a hatred of humanity—by expressing a worry that "the self-limiting forms of moral life being celebrated [in the book] are increasingly impossible under contemporary conditions," where hubris "dominates our forms of life," though he does find it a consolation that there are still advocates of humble forms of life, such as myself. But he also sees a "latent pessimism" within my advocacy of limits, which he thinks is particularly evident in the chapter on economic limits, given how much of our economic life currently involves a rejection of limits. Kidd believes I should embrace a quietist position, which he thinks I am too quick to dismiss, though he maintains that my position can in fact be regarded as a form of quietism given my "defense of moderation, appreciation of human limitedness, and hostility to 'Prometheanism.'"

I do want to avoid pessimism, misanthropy, and quietism. Generally, I am a mixed bagist; that is, I think in most, if not all, domains of life there is often good and bad mixed in together, and the goal is to foster the good and reduce the bad as best as one can, while acknowledging perfection (or utopia) is not possible. This is true, for instance, in my assessment of capitalism: on the one hand, capitalism has drastically helped to reduce poverty and increase prosperity overall; on the other hand, it has fostered greed, alienation, environmental degradation, and increased economic inequality (which can threaten the social bond of a political community). So, the aim of my vision of home economics is to reduce the bad, while maintaining and fostering the good. I also think our human nature is a mixed bag, with capacity for good and evil, and so again the goal of character formation is to foster the good and avoid the bad as best as we can. Beyond this, my aim is to be fundamentally affirmative both with respect to humanity and the given world as a whole. As discussed earlier, in order to address the problem of cosmodicy, we need to find a way to see life in the world as fundamentally good and worth affirming despite the ill. In other words, we need to find a way to be at home in the world amidst imperfection. And doing so is also important for motivating our efforts to seek improvement.

Regarding quietism, I think the dispute is partly terminological since we define quietism in different ways. The only time I mention quietism explicitly is when I note that the politics of imperfection that I defend "does not mean quietism": "In many ways we ought to seek improvement, but a politics of imperfection requires us to acknowledge that perfection in politics is not feasible, and the attempt to achieve it often brings about greater problems than those that it sought to overcome (as we see in the utopian political projects of the twentieth century)" (McPherson 2022a, pp. 109-10). Even though I don't explicitly use the term beyond this mention, I am in fact concerned to avoid quietism throughout the book, particularly when stressing that the accepting-appreciating stance toward the given does not rule out the choosing-controlling stance in seeking improvement, but rather it should inform when and how we take it up. I take quietism then to be the polar opposite extreme of Prometheanism: rather than seeking godlike mastery over the world, it involves a mere acceptance of the status quo and rejects all projects of improvement. I think both extremes should be avoided, and in the book I seek to chart a path between them.

Kidd thinks that I "oddly" define quietism "as failing to seek improvement," and he says that this is "not the quietism exemplified by the Buddha, Epicurus, Zhuāngzi, and others," which "aspires to goals of harmony and equanimity and gentle ways of life. The virtues include humility, self-restraint, calmness, diffidence and reticence, and the discipline needed to dial down our desires." I don't think, however, that my definition of quietism is odd at all since it is in accord with standard dictionary definitions. For instance, *Oxford Languages* defines "quietism" as "calm acceptance of things as they are without attempts to resist or change them"; *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as "the belief that it is best to accept things in life and not

try to change them"; and *Merriam-Webster* defines it as "a passive withdrawn attitude or policy toward the world or worldly affairs." The term itself was originally used to denote a controversial Christian mystical teaching—associated with the 17th century Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos—according to which spiritual perfection is said to consist "in passivity (quiet) of the soul, in the suppression of human effort so that divine action may have full play" (*Britannica*). In other words, the goal is the complete abandonment or annihilation of the will so as to be completely passive to God in contemplation. The view was in fact condemned as heretical by the Catholic Church for failing to acknowledge the importance of the human will in cooperating with divine grace in pursuing the good and resisting evil.

Now what Kidd means by quietism seems to be something like what Alasdair MacIntyre suggests at the end of *After Virtue*. MacIntyre sees our modern liberal political and economic order as fundamentally hostile and corrosive to the life of virtue due to its individualism and acquisitiveness, and so he thinks that what we need is "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. … We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict" (MacIntyre 2007 [1981/1984], p. 263). This is not quietistic in the sense of foregoing all efforts of seeking improvement, but the focus of improvement is on our local communities and our own intellectual and moral lives. There is a lot I find attractive in MacIntyre's suggestion here. Indeed, in connection with my defense of the limiting virtues of neighborliness and loyalty, I argue for a humane localism that recognizes that "we need to live on a human scale as limited, placed creatures who are bound by intrinsically valuable and identity-constituting loves and loyalties, while also recognizing the intrinsic dignity of our common humanity," and it accepts the principle of subsidiarity according to which "we ought to deal with political matters as close to the matter at hand as possible, and higher levels of government should support the lower levels," and it sees this as important for democratic self-government (McPherson 2022a, pp. 89-90). I also argue for a form of limited government that acknowledges that "[many] of the most important pursuits in life—such as our pursuits with respect to love, friendship, family life, religious devotion, intellectual enquiry, meaningful work, projects of self-cultivation, etc.—lie outside of the political domain, and politics should make space for these pursuits" (p. 123).

Where I diverge from MacIntyre is with regard to his pessimistic view that we are living in a "new dark age." Again, I am a mixed bagist: our age, like other ages, contains both good and bad. We can see much good that has come about in the modern world, but which often also comes with problematic aspects: for instance, modern democracy allows for people to have a voice in their government, but it also allows for greater disagreement; modern freedom counters oppressive government action, but it can also encourage a problematic ideal of autonomy that is opposed to the life of virtue; and, finally, recall what I said about the mixed bag nature of capitalism earlier. And so our task in this age, as in every age, is to discover, appreciate, affirm, conserve, and promote the good in the given world and to reduce the bad as best as we can, while acknowledging that there is no utopia to be realized or golden age to which we can return.[8] It should be noted that even MacIntyre is not entirely quietistic in relation to the modern state, as he acknowledges that there are "many tasks only to be performed in and through government which still require performing: the rule of law, so far as it is possible in a modern state, has to be vindicated, injustice and unwarranted suffering have to be dealt with, generosity has to be exercised, and liberty has to be defended, in ways that are sometimes only possible through the use of governmental institutions" (MacIntyre 2007 [1981/1984], p. 225).

I now want to turn to the essays from Brandon Warmke, Xavier Symons, and Doug Rasmussen, all of which are more constructive than critical. Warmke seeks to build on my account of the limiting virtue of neighborliness in highlighting several sub-virtues, namely, hospitality, friendliness, and what he calls "neighborliness proper." While agreeing with my criticisms of impartialist modern moral theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism, Warmke does worry that perhaps I define the virtue of neighborliness too broadly when I understand it as "the virtue of being properly responsive to the dignity of other human beings in face-to-face (or close) encounters and the demands they can make on us," and as "a form of human solidarity that recognizes the moral significance of proximity" (McPherson 2022a, p. 73). He asks whether one is being neighborly when treating his or her child's scrape? He says he's not sure, and thus it might be

objected that "neighborliness has been characterized so broadly that any compassionate, helping behavior shown toward someone physically close to you will count as neighborliness."

On my account of the virtue of neighborliness, I would in fact say that such behavior counts as neighborliness. Perhaps some cases—such as the one Warmke mentions of treating one's child's scrape—sound odd to describe as neighborly in light of our current linguistic practices. We typically think of our neighbor as someone who lives close by but not in our own home. Hence, Warmke describes neighborliness proper as being concerned with right relationship with those who live close by. My defense for using neighborliness in this broad way is twofold: First, we need some term to describe the form of human solidarity that recognizes the moral significance of promixity and gives special attention to concrete rather than abstract humanity. Second, in our Western cultural traditions, particularly in the biblical traditions, we find teachings on the love of neighbor that are likewise broad in scope, and these teachings are the inspiration for my account of neighborliness. Indeed, as Warmke acknowledges, I take the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) as providing a paradigmatic case of the virtue of neighborliness, and in the parable Jesus explicitly challenges the conventional idea that our neighbor whom we are to love (or care for) is just someone who lives nearby, since the Samaritan and the man in dire need that he helps are from different communities. There is a universalization of the ethic of neighbor love in the parable, but it still recognizes the moral significance of proximity, as suggested by the concept of "neighbor" (one who is *nigh*): "when [the Good Samaritan] saw him, he had compassion on him." The message of the parable is that we ought to be ready to act with solidarity with any human being we come across, that is, in the words of G. K. Chesterton, with "the sample of humanity which is actually given us" (Chesterton 1986 [1905], p. 140).[9]

Setting the definitional issue aside, Warmke is most interested in offering what I think is an illuminating sketch of the virtue of hospitality as a sub-virtue of what I call neighborliness. As he describes it, the virtue of hospitality involves welcoming particular others (typically in one's home), attending to their needs, and sharing things together (e.g., a meal, conversation, etc.). In short, the virtue of hospitality is concerned with "attentive welcoming." Warmke also notes that this consists in a mean between excessive, overbearing attentiveness and deficient attentiveness (being neglectful). I think if I were to add anything to this discussion it would be to suggest an extension of this conception of hospitality as attentive welcoming to include a way of relating to the given goods of the world, akin to my discussions of loyalty to the given and existential gratitude. We might call this *existential hospitality* as it involves an attentive welcoming toward the given goods of the world and an effort to protect and preserve them. In fact, we might say that this is just another way of talking about the accepting-appreciating stance toward the given. Such hospitality, I think, would be especially focused on welcoming the gift of new human life and seeking to foster a supportive environment for this life. This will take different forms, depending on whether the child is a member of one's family or not, but as a society we should also foster a welcoming and supportive environment for every new child.

These remarks also connect with Symons' essay, where he suggests that *The Virtues of Limits* implies a vision for bioethics, and in particular, he thinks my account of the two fundamental existential stances—the choosing-controlling stance and the accepting-appreciating stance—can be "operationalized in bioethics in a way that represents a new direction for the discipline." Symons notes that I touch on one bioethics topic, namely, the ethics of genetic engineering (in Chapter 1 on "Existential Limits"), and he also notes that my account of the two existential stances is indebted to other bioethicists—namely, Leon Kass and Michael Sandel (both of whom I cite)—that are swimming against the stream of the dominant autonomy-centered and consequentialist outlooks that are generally hostile to limits. What my book adds is a fuller account of the proper relationship between the two fundamental existential stances, an account of the limiting virtues that are needed for achieving this, and an account of why doing so matters with application well beyond the field of bioethics; indeed, I offer a vision of the good life. Regarding bioethics, I endorse what Kass describes as the Hippocratic position according to which "the doctor is nature's cooperative ally and not its master" (Kass 1985, p. 234).[10] In other words, medicine should promote the natural end of health, rather than merely cater to autonomous preferences or support efforts of enhancement that seek to transcend our humanity.

But why not seek unlimited mastery? I think Symons gets to the heart of the matter when he notes that in my view (which he endorses) we need to be "cognizant of the role that … limits play in structuring and making available certain basic goods for our choosing." Or as I put it: "an appreciative stance toward what is of intrinsic value in the given world provides the necessary background against which genuinely significant choices can be made," and recognizing such intrinsic value means recognizing constraints on our choices. One constraint is the demand of loyalty placed on us by existing valuable things, including our humanity. This is what I call loyalty to the given, and it opposes the mindset that sees everything, including our humanity, as replaceable by something better. As I have discussed, an accepting-appreciating stance toward the given world helps us to become at home in the world amidst the hardship that will always remain part of our condition. Building upon this, Symon puts it well when he says: "bioethics ought to help human beings recognize that accepting human limits is about being at home in the world and living meaningful and fulfilled lives. This shift in perspective is achieved through the cultivation of humility and reverence, contentment and gratitude, and loyalty to the given."

I agree with Symons that my framework in *The Virtues of Limits* has application to a number of other issues in bioethics besides genetic engineering, including abortion, assisted suicide, and surgical alterations of healthy bodies that attempt to match some preferred self-image. I have addressed abortion and assisted suicide elsewhere (see McPherson 2015, 2021, 2022c), and going forward I hope to say more about bioethics issues. But I agree with Symons that the role of bioethics regarding such interventions should be "to illustrate the existential and moral costs associated with taking radical control over fundamental aspects of our human embodiment," and I would add that it should also be to reveal the giftedness of human life and human embodiment.

Let me now turn finally to Rasmussen's essay, where he aims to affirm the limiting virtues within his Aristotelian perfectionist framework, while also showing how perfecting our human nature through the virtues—i.e., achieving human flourishing—will also involve overcoming limitations. My own framework is broadly Aristotelian, and so I am fully in agreement that achieving our human flourishing will require overcoming limitations. Indeed, the book begins with an acknowledgment that achieving what is best in our humanity requires transcending limits. After all, we are not born virtuous but must become so,[11] and thus we must overcome the limitations of our current non-virtuous tendencies. Filling this out is not my focus in the book, since my aim is to explore how lack of proper acknowledgement of limits can lead to dehumanization and failure to attain important human goods and prevent human evils, and so I seek to develop an account of those virtues—the limiting virtues—that properly acknowledge limits that should not be transcended. But Rasmussen's essay is a welcome contribution because it highlights the positive side of transcending limits for human flourishing, as well as the importance of practical wisdom for knowing when to transcend limits and when not to do so.

My project in the book can be seen as addressing several questions surrounding an Aristotelian perfectionist framework. First of all, why accept the limits implied by the Aristotelian account of *human* flourishing? How do we deal with the fact that human beings also seek to transcend their humanity? I engage with these sorts of questions extensively in Chapter 1, focusing particularly on criticizing advocates of genetic engineering. In that chapter I affirm the following remark from Martha Nussbaum: "Human limits structure the human excellences, and give excellent action its significance … [Hubris is] the failure to comprehend what sort of life one has actually got, the failure to live within its limits" (Nussbaum 1990, pp. 378, 381).[12] The sentiment here is similar to one expressed above by Kass about medicine needing to be "nature's cooperative ally and not its master," though he is focused on bodily health, and here the focus is more broadly on human flourishing. But in both cases we need to show why the hubris involved in seeking to transcend our humanity and master nature is so problematic. Again, I seek to show how a willfulness that recognizes no constraints on choice provided by what is of intrinsic value in the given world threatens a kind of nihilism, where we have nothing worth choosing. I also seek to show how it specifically fails to recognize the demands of loyalty that existing valuable things—including our humanity—make upon us, and it fails to find a way to be at home in the world, rather than in a perpetual state of alienation from it. This

point also connects with another question that an Aristotelian perfectionist framework must address: how do we deal with our inevitable imperfection? We need to find a way to be at home in the world and at peace with ourselves amidst imperfection, while also striving for improvement.

If I were to quibble with anything in Rasmussen's essay it would be that there is a stronger individualism and self-focus (which is *not* to say selfishness) in his approach than mine, which could be described as more communitarian. For instance, he says that "the pursuit of self-perfection is the overarching end of human life," and for this he says relationships, while important, "are not primary," since "the emphasis is on what kind of self one is making." But I think that an Aristotelian should say that relationships are in an important sense primary, since, as Aristotle notes in *Politics* I.2, it is only in and through the *polis* (or human community) that we can achieve our good (i.e., self-perfection), which is why he says we are by nature political (or communal) animals. Indeed, we can go further and say that our very sense of self is constituted in and through social relationships, that is, we are, as Sandel puts it, "encumbered selves," where our selves are properly seen as constituted in and through unchosen social and moral ties (as sons and daughters, parents, neighbors, citizens, etc.), and if we are to live well as human beings it will be through our proper responsiveness to these ties. This is not to deny that we all have own individuality, but this is an individuality that is worked out through our responsiveness to contingencies of our natural and social circumstances.

Related to the issue of individualism, there also seems to be some disagreement between Rasmussen and myself in our assessment of capitalism. While I am a defender of the truly free market (which I contend requires economic decentralization), and I argue against socialism, I express considerable ambivalence about capitalism, particularly regarding its "unsettling" (or alienating) tendencies and its tendency to promote greed. As noted earlier, I argue that we need a "home economics" that recovers something of Aristotle's idea of *oikonomia* as centering on the home (*oikos*), but also as contributing to the common good of the particular communities to which one belongs. I also argue that the vice of greed needs to be counteracted through the limiting virtue of contentment, which makes possible true freedom where we are not enslaved by our own desires for more and more. At the same time, I defend the dignity of work in actualizing our human capacities, improving our circumstances, providing for our families, contributing to the common good of our communities, and making a home in the world. Rasmussen also affirms that greed is a vice, but he seems less inclined to put restrictions on the market. But since our prospects for living well are significantly influenced by our social, political, and economic circumstances, I think there is a legitimate place in democratic self-government for seeking to order the economy through practical wisdom toward appropriately human ends of individual and communal flourishing.

In concluding his reflections on the role of limits in human flourishing, Rasmussen approvingly cites the beautiful and moving "Serenity Prayer," which is as follows: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." If I were to add a slight revision to the prayer for the sake of greater accuracy, and to bring out what I think is already implicit in the prayer, I would say: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot or *should not* change; courage to change the things I *should*; and the wisdom to know the difference." After all, there are changes that we could make but should not make because they involve good things we should conserve, and what we need courage for is changing what should be changed, and knowing the difference is a matter of our habits of appreciative attention to the given goods of the world.

NOTES

1 The following précis draws from McPherson 2022a and 2022b.

2 The part in quotations is from Carson Holloway's excellent review of *The Virtues of Limits* (Holloway 2022).

3 In a footnote on p. 15 I remark that my approach here contrasts "not only with those who think the choosing-controlling stance should be dominant but also with those who seek a 'balance' between the two existential stances, such as Erik Parens, who seeks a balance between what he calls 'the creativity stance' and 'the gratitude stance' (Parens 2015, ch. 3)." I go on to say: "In my view such a concern with achieving balance is not the right approach, since it suggests that the stances … are separate from each other, and we need (more or less) an equal amount of both. I do not think the stances should be seen as separate, and I think the accepting-appreciating stance should be seen as more fundamental." In a footnote of his own, Smyth describes this last sentence as cryptic, and he says: "It isn't clear, in context, whether this means that they literally aren't meant to exclude one another in any sense. If so, then I am at a loss to understand how one could be prioritized over another. … [If] the two stances do not exclude one another in any deep way then the book's controlling idea seems to fall apart." I have to say that I am at a loss to understand why he would find the remark cryptic because it is the aim of that section to explain my three reasons for thinking that the accepting-appreciating stance has primacy or is more fundamental than the choosing-controlling stance, and it is also clear that I don't mean to exclude the choosing-controlling stance but rather to have it be informed by the accepting-appreciating stance.

4 Compare this with a passage from Hegel that I cite in the book (see McPherson 2022a, p. 148), where Hegel discusses how it is through work that a human being "humanizes his environment": "Only by means of this effectual activity is he no longer merely in general, but also in particular and in detail, actually aware of himself and at home in his environment" (Hegel 1975 [1835], p. 256).

5 Smyth also characterizes my position as conservative. For the most part I don't explicitly frame my position as "conservative" in the book, except when drawing on G. A. Cohen's work I say that the attitude toward the given that we both accept can labeled as "existential conservatism" (p. 16; see also pp. 104-7). I didn't want the label to distract from the arguments in the book; after all, many self-identified "progressives" resonate with talk of the importance of limits in economics and ecology, and I hope they will be drawn to those parts of my book, and that they will also be open to my arguments for the broader importance of limits in human life. But I accept the label as long as it is understood along the lines of my limiting virtues and my characterization of the relationship between the accepting-appreciating stance and the choosing-controlling stance. Elsewhere I have articulated and explicitly endorsed a conservative perspective in line with my views in *The Virtues of Limits:* see McPherson 2019, 2024.

   At one point, Cokelet remarks: "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)." Since I was not explicitly making the case for conservatism in the book, I did not think this was necessary. I am very clear, however, that my position is not a mere affirmation of the status quo, and I do a lot to resist such a view.

6 Cokelet also thinks there is more to be said for liberal individualism, though he doesn't actually say what that is. For instance, he remarks: "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." I don't think my rejection is at all cursory since I discuss and criticize influential liberal philosophers (of different stripes)—namely, Dworkin, Rawls, Brennan, and Nussbaum—at considerable length in chapters 1, 3, and 4. Cokelet also doesn't explain how exactly liberal individualists resist nihilism and the Promethean tendency (in fact, many end up being quite Promethean). Instead, he just contends that "[some] liberal individualists will contest the idea that they are willful Prometheans who give priority to choosing and controlling over appreciating and accepting," and "[others] will accept the char-

acterization but contend that McPherson's criticisms of moderate willful Prometheans are weak and underdeveloped." But Cokelet does not engage here with my three reasons for regarding the accepting-appreciating stance as having primacy. Since his main focus is on developing a Romantic alternative, that view will also be my focus.

7 Cf. "To come closer to [goods], to have a clearer view of them, to come to grasp what they involve, is for those who recognize them to be moved to love or respect them, and through this love/respect to be better enabled to live up to them. … Without any articulation at all, we would lose all contact with the good" (Taylor 1989, pp. 96-7).

8 In the last several sentences I have drawn from McPherson 2024, p. 124.

9 The last several sentences draw from McPherson 2022a, p. 74.

10 Cf. "To appreciate children as gifts … is not to be passive in the face of illness or disease. Healing a sick or injured child does not override her natural capacities but permits them to flourish. Although medical treatment intervenes in nature, it does so for the sake of health, and so does not represent a boundless bid for mastery and dominion" (Sandel 2007, pp. 46-7).

11 As Aristotle puts it: "the virtues come about in us neither by nature nor against nature, rather we are naturally receptive of them and are brought to completion through habit" (Aristotle 2014 [c.325 BC], II.1).

12 Compare Rasmussen: "Having a nature that prescribes the pursuit of certain goods and the exercise of certain virtues sets a limit on what will be morally worthwhile."

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