Homemakers: On McPherson's *The Virtues of Limits*

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I

My son is amazing. At the age of three, he has learned to love our morning walks through the streets of the Bronx, principally because of the huge array of plants he can collect. Fifteen minutes in, he usually has what he calls a "bouquet," one full of plants whose names he has forced me to learn. Alexander, Goose Grass, Mugwort, Pineapple Weed, and of course, the coveted *Dandelion*. He gleefully stops to pick each of these whenever he can, remarking on their size, shape, and color, placing them in the "bouquet" and eagerly seeking the next one.

This wide-eyed astonishment at reality is an arresting thing for an adult to see, because most of us long ago lost the ability to encounter the world in this way, as just containing intrinsically and unqualifiedly wonderous things. We, after all, have learned to distinguish flowers from weeds. *Weeds* can't compose a bouquet, and only an uneducated child would say otherwise. There is no point in collecting or gathering *weeds*, unless they're going into mulch, where they may act as serviceable extrinsic value.

I admit that these thoughts have recently caused me to wonder, in a sort of Rousseauean mood, whether the age of three isn't in fact the pinnacle of human flourishing and happiness. Whether our final 5-8 decades don't represent a lesser mode of existence. This is because, as we grow older, we lose that extraordinary ability to encounter reality as wonderous without making any deep evaluative *distinctions* within it. This loss introduces a certain cynicism and guardedness into our lives, without which we would not become functioning adults, but which also poisons our experience in certain ways. We are no longer *at home* in the world.

II

I have been interested in David McPherson's work for some time because he is trying to do something that comparatively few academics try to do, which is to inject some of this capacity for wonder and appreciation back into social theory. I am going out on a limb here, and perhaps he would disagree with this characterization, but I think that at his best he is reminding philosophers and social theorists that their persistent *restlessness* is not the only mood under which we may encounter and theorize about the social world. I suspect that, generally speaking, we academics in the humanities and social sciences are temperamentally restless and cynical about the world, and so it is refreshing to read an academic who writes from what is so obviously a different standpoint.

However, in my view, McPherson's concrete project—to give this standpoint moral and political significance—doesn't work. In order to see this, we need to dig as deeply as we can into what he, in *The Virtues of Limits*, calls the "accepting-appreciating stance," and we need to ask difficult questions about what this stance is and about how it could possibly guide social and political life. I shall argue that there are two importantly different conceptions of this stance in McPherson's work, and neither of them actually grounds McPherson's concrete moral and political program. That program is just animated by a particular set of values, and it does not have its source in any attitude toward the given.

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McPherson's positive program involves advocating for an affirmative stance towards reality, one that naturally leads to certain "limiting" virtues. Those virtues, in turn, are said to lead us to concrete political positions or social ideals. The result at least looks like a picture of social life that is more restrained, more content, less ambitious, and less revolutionary than it might otherwise be. But the edifice relies, first and foremost, on the cogency and coherence of that affirmative stance.

So here is my first main claim: in the book, and in his work more generally, McPherson oscillates between two incompatible conceptions of what counts as adopting an affirmative stance toward reality. The first conception, which I'll call the *automatic* one, calls upon us to affirm reality as it is, to accept and appreciate our lives and the world in which we live. The second, which I'll call the *selective* conception, 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. In his earlier articulation of this stance, when it was called "existential conservatism," McPherson described it this way:

> What is existential conservatism? Simply put, it is an existential stance—i.e. an orientation towards the given—that seeks to discover, appreciate, affirm, and conserve what is good in the world as it is … The stance of the existential conservative contrasts with existential stances that emphasize a repudiation of the given… We see this in Michael Oakeshott's description of the conservative disposition as centering on "a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be" (McPherson 2019, p. 384).
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> The radical progressive and the golden ageist are both agreed in finding the given world to be a disappointment…The existential conservative, by contrast, seeks… to discover, appreciate, affirm, and conserve what is good in the given world… the goal is to feel at home in the given world.
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> The crucial point is about our orientation towards 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 centred on affirmation or repudiation, *yes-saying* or *no-saying*? (McPherson 2019, p. 387).

Notice that when McPherson cites Oakeshott, or when he speaks of *yes-saying*, the automatic interpretation makes most sense. If the goal is to "feel at home in the given world," or to simply delight in what is present, then affirmation of that world, no matter how it appears, becomes vitally necessary. This automatic conception is also suggested by his description of the *contrasting* stance, which is said to repudiate the given. The contrary of repudiating the given is affirming it. So perhaps this is all the stance amounts to: affirming reality as it is, automatically.

But at other points in the text, it is clear that only what is *good* in the world is to receive affirmation. When McPherson qualifies the yes-saying by claiming that we should affirm only that which has value, this is no longer *yes-saying,* nor is it Oakeshott's "delight in what is present." After all, what is present can be quite nasty indeed. Affirmative attitudes, on the selective interpretation, are entirely conditional on an ex-

istential conservative's finding the world, or their life, to be actually valuable. But if they do not find this, then they won't affirm the world at all, and their stance will be a *no-saying*. They are selectively affirmative.

So, is the existential conservative automatic or selective? I don't think it's possible to excavate a clear commitment from McPherson here. Indeed, this unclarity returns with a vengeance in *The Virtues of Limits*, where the trouble shows up in the distinction between *accepting-appreciating* and *choosing-controlling* stances. The master idea of the book is that the former stance ought to generally take priority over the latter, and that the limiting virtues tell us how to do this. But McPherson's description of the two stances invites the very ambiguity I've been highlighting here.

A person in the grips of the choosing-controlling stance is said to engage in "efforts to improve their lives and the world around them through controlling, transforming, and overcoming the given." The contrary stance, logically speaking, would be someone who does *not* seek to improve things in this way. So, the accepting-appreciating stance, if it is to genuinely exclude its rival, would have to consist in *not* seeking to improve the world by controlling, transforming, or overcoming the given. That is, a person in this stance would just be an *automatic* yes-sayer. And when he first mentions it, McPherson's description of this stance fits squarely in the automatic category, since it is said to "involve accepting and appreciating the given." This, he later tells us, just is his existential conservatism, which "is concerned with an accepting-appreciating stance toward what exists, that is, toward the given world" (McPherson 2022, p. 16). This is the automatic conception, which has us accepting reality as it is.

But McPherson immediately illustrates this idea by citing G. A. Cohen's own conservative orientation, which involves accepting only "*some* things as given, particularly intrinsically valuable things" (2022, p. 17). This is the selective conception of the accepting-appreciating stance, which is of course inconsistent with the automatic one. And throughout the book the "limiting virtues" are said to respond to what actually has intrinsic value in the world, and not just to what happens to exist. This suggests that the stance itself is in fact deeply selective, that a person inhabiting it refuses to improve only the *good* parts of reality, remaining fully open to full-blown Prometheanism about the rest of their reality.

There is nothing in the text that resolves this crucial ambiguity. And the ambiguity is no accident. As I have argued elsewhere, McPherson is inheriting it from the conservative tradition in political thought, which has steadfastly refused to settle on whether we are meant to conserve the institutions we actually have or whether we are only meant to conserve the good ones (Smyth, 2023).

IV

All of this being said, there are in fact powerful reasons for McPherson to stick to the automatic conception, for it is the only one which can ground a distinctive worldview. This is because the selective conception is fully compatible with full-blown revolutionary Prometheanism about our social world.

In order to see this, suppose that McPherson takes the selective route, and says that the accepting-appreciating stance affirms that which is valuable in the world. But this requires that I *inquire* into the value of the given world, carefully sorting out what bits of it are genuinely good (or good enough) and which bits are not. I have to stop simply loving the plants in my hand and asking whether or not they are weeds. That is, I must *undertake* to discover and affirm value, and it is very hard to see how, in conducting this exercise, I am to avoid the impulse to improve the disvaluable bits. What does it mean to sincerely judge something in one's environment to be disvaluable and yet to experience no motivation at all to improve it? There doesn't seem to be much room in human psychology for this possibility, if any at all. But if this is right, then in what sense are the accepting-appreciating and choosing-controlling stances *exclusive*?[1] The person we are describing is perfectly open to massive changes in the 'given world', and if their world is bad enough, they'll be nothing short of a revolutionary Promethean. The only way the two stances can logically exclude one other is if the accepting-appreciator is basically an automatic appreciator, as my son is with plant life. This is, after all, the only way to ensure that you are at home in the world: if you have to think about whether your home is *good enough*, then you are essentially welcoming the choosing-controlling stance back into your mindset.

For these reasons, I think McPherson can allow only the first, automatic conception of existential conservatism, for this is the only one that will actually *contrast* with the radical progressive or Promethean stance as he describes it. An accepting-appreciator is just someone relatively disposed to affirm the world as it is. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. I believe that I am one such person, and I often notice that basic disagreements I have with people around me seem to bottom out in a temperamental valuation (or lack thereof) of life and of existence itself. I can and should deploy the temperament in my own life, enjoying the warmth and glow of that existential fireplace. I may even recommend that the less affirmative around me develop, for their own sake, practices that might encourage a kind of deep appreciation for life, the universe, and everything.

But I would never try to claim that this yes-saying temperament of mine should have *authority* over social and political life in general, that it ought to take priority in public decision-making. This is because a conception of politics as automatic world-affirmation is unquestionably a disaster.

It is surely an excellent thing to feel at home in the world, as I've made clear in my opening remarks. But, as biologists tell us, 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 (Laland et al. 2016). 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.

Yet, the list of profound improvements in human life that have been derided as "Promethean" by some critic or another is too long to include in this paper. There are oft-cited examples: democracy itself, the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and universal childhood education. But there are many less-famous examples, particularly from medical science, procedures that are now so universally appreciated that the idea of opposition to them seems absurd. Vaccines once seemed, to some, like a dangerous gamble, but they have saved untold hundreds of millions from profound agony. Agony which, I should stress, is quite incompatible with feeling at home in the given world.

Anesthesia was opposed on the grounds that our natural capacity to feel pain was being interrupted. Organ transplants and life-saving blood transfusions have been described as "playing God." And it is easy to picture automatic accepting-appreciators scattered throughout human history grumbling about the "Prometheanism" of plumbing, or the metal plough, or indeed about settled agriculture itself, all because they felt at home in the world as it is and didn't like people coming along and trying to improve it. Mary Shelley, author of the genre-defining anti-Promethean novel *Frankenstein,* died from a brain tumor that is now routinely removed by surgery, 51 years after her own mother, the pioneering feminist Mary Wollestonecraft, died from a type of childbirth complication that is now basically unheard of in the industrialized world. Though Shelley's own purpose in the novel is far subtler (it is about failures of care and not the excesses of scientific ambition), her family's intense suffering illustrates the blunt absurdity of knee-jerk world-affirmation.

Thus, it is far too late in human history for anyone to seriously believe that an instinctive appreciation for things *as they actually are* should enjoy primacy in our shared social life. In the 21st century, we owe our lives, our health, and our ability to be at home in the world to millions upon millions of Promethean niche-constructors (Dworkin 2000, p. 443). Some of them may have gone wrong, some may seek to lead us down dark paths upon which we ought not to tread, but this is a matter for substantive normative inquiry, and not something we can decide in advance on the basis of some default world-affirmation stance. That orientation may be a nice thing to enjoy in an individual's life, but as a political program it is quite frankly a nightmare.

Thus, the basic problem for anyone who wants to make *conservation* or *appreciation* dominant or primary in our shared life together is to say why they would not have joined the chorus of opposition to these extraordinary human gifts, recommending anti-Prometheanism precisely when the Prometheans among us were poised to become world-historic heroes. It's not clear that the temperament, defined in automatic terms, has the resources to avoid this result.

V

Again, the key idea is supposed to be that the accepting-appreciating stance can motivate various "limiting" virtues operative in key domains of human life. One such virtue is *contentment*, which is said by McPherson to motivate a sufficientarian conception of justice. This attractive conception states that what matters, for the purposes of distribution, is that everyone has *enough* to enjoy a good life, and not that they necessarily enjoy an equal distribution. I find this conception of justice extremely compelling and wish it were more prominent in contemporary political debates (I am a choosing-controller about contemporary political debates). However, it is telling that in another section of the book, McPherson cites a 2013 study claiming that above US$75,000 household income, people in the US are not made happier, and he refers to this amount as "enough," suggesting that it might constitute something close to his sufficientarian economic standard (2022, p. 136).

But in the same year, 2013, the median US household income was around $52,000, and nearly 70% of the population lived in households making less than $75,000.[2] This means that by his own sufficientarian lights, a huge chunk of the American population does not have enough. A redistribution project that would bring every household above this level would be revolutionary, almost unprecedented in American history. So, I ask: in what sense does this conception of justice flow from anything like *contentment*, or indeed from any accepting-appreciating stance more generally? Contentment arrives on the scene *after* the standard has been met, not before. The sufficientarian view doesn't just permit a choosing-controlling stance, it positively requires it, very possibly calling upon us to work toward greater distributive justice within every human society that has ever existed.

But this should not surprise us, since any reader of the book can see that McPherson himself does not actually feel at home in the given world. After all, he often recommends in *The Virtues of Limits* that various damaging tendencies in modern social and economic life be reversed or fought against (McPherson 2022, p. 155). I find some of those arguments quite compelling, but that is because they seem like admirable *repudiations* of the given, a series of no-sayings to parts of our reality that are not as valuable as they could be, proposals for "efforts to improve our lives and the world around us through controlling, transforming, and overcoming the given." If you affirm a part of reality, and then watch as it slowly but surely starts to slip away, how can you *not* become a choosing-controller?

Here, I am quite sure what McPherson 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." So perhaps the automatic conception of the accepting-appreciating stance has been the problem, here, and we should do as the more selective conception tells us, which is to look at the world in order to see what is good in it before proceeding to change it.

Such thoughts do sound entirely sensible, but they sound this way because virtually no one disagrees with them. There may be incautious voices in the political arena—likely terminally online—who say things that make them sound like auto-revolutionaries, people who seem to want to tear down existing things *before* even surveying what might be valuable and worth preserving in them. But the idea of someone who actually takes this attitude toward the world as a whole is in fact utterly incredible, and certainly no political philosopher I know of has ever adopted it. I do not know who McPherson is arguing with: we are *all* selective appreciators. Even the hard-core revolutionary Marxist or anarchist surely finds *some* things in the world valuable; they may have some experience of non-alienated labor, they may have seen communal ownership in action, they may simply know what class solidarity feels like. It is exceedingly unlikely that their revolutionary program proceeds *uninformed* by any of these observations. But if a full-blown Marxist revolutionary can count as someone who has "made the accepting-appreciating stance primary," then this label is not interesting or worth advocating for, since it basically applies to all of us.

Here, I believe that McPherson will want to supplement the selective-appreciator stance with Cohen's central idea, which is that the conservative standpoint calls upon us to preserve *actually existing* value. The idea is that if X actually exists and has value, this standpoint tells us to avoid destroying X in order to create a merely possible Y, even when Y would be *more* valuable (Cohen 2004). Importantly, for Cohen, this was simply a temperamental preference and not something that he, *qua* Marxist, wished to turn into a comprehensive political program. Perhaps this was because he sensed that it would prohibit such things as the building of houses, so long as the proposed construction site has literally *anything of value* on it. If the selective appreciator really calls upon us to survey what is of value in the world and to preserve it *no matter what*, they are basically prohibiting most forms of niche-construction. No recognizably human society could embrace this constraint, and so the only believable version of selective-appreciation cannot genuinely exclude Marxist revolutionaries.

Now, McPherson believes, as a substantive matter, that the Marxist is *missing* a great deal of value in the world, since he believes that free markets are often the most efficient available economic mechanism, and he believes that we should affirm the importance of private property as a means to being at home in the world (2022, p. 146). But this dispute is not in any way *adjudicated* by contrasting existential stances; what we have is an internal dispute between two inhabitants of the (selective) accepting-appreciating stance, a dispute that is over what in the world actually has value. That, as they say, is where the action is.

I conclude that McPherson's virtues do not in fact flow from any distinction between accepting-appreciating and choosing-controlling stances, or from anything called existential conservatism. They are grounded in his judgments about what actually has value in the world. And many of those judgments may be entirely correct, so far as it goes, though of course some will dispute them. But the central framing of the book—that somehow, the idea of "accepting-appreciating" helps us to resolve those disputes—is not, in the end, supported. We are all Prometheans when the need seems urgent enough, and so the only real question can be: when is the need urgent enough?

VI

It is possible that the scars left by the French and Russian Revolutions have distorted Western political thought in a crucial way. The narratives and dynamics local to those events have encouraged us to divide the political world into those who favor possibility and those who favor actuality, with the corresponding labels "progressive" and "conservative." This *modal* conception of politics doesn't actually capture the substance of most important debates.

The uselessness of the modal conception comes out most clearly in McPherson's discussion of the genetic engineering of children. This project, he claims, unacceptably makes the choosing-controlling stance dominant, and in doing so it "violates intrinsic value." This is because "genetic engineering takes a wrongful posture toward the unmerited good of children by failing properly to accept and appreciate children as gifts." But what is a gift, in this sense? Here, McPherson approvingly cites Michael Sandel: "To appreciate children as gifts is to accept them as they come, not as objects of our design, or products of our will, that is, it requires an openness to the unbidden (2022, p. 18).

Now, I'm not sure that the word *gift* is helpful here: no one thinks that just *anything* can count as a gift. A genuine gift is one that is properly responsive to what the person actually wants or needs, something they would *choose* for themselves if they could. If I am to appreciate something as a *gift*, this does not at all imply that I cannot take a choosing-controlling stance toward it. In fact, the *only* time I might be justified in automatically accepting something that is given to me is when it comes from someone who loves me, who is omniscient, and who is powerful enough to conjure up the best things for me. But scripture tells us that even the most righteous and holy man alive was not capable of this kind of automatic acceptance, and that when God "gave" him poverty, a collapsed home full of dead children, and horrible sores on his feet, Job wished he had never been born (Job 3:1-11).

So, the deeper problem here involves the idea of accepting children "as they come," which, the reader should note, frames this crucial political issue in modal terms, in terms of what *is* as opposed to what *could be*. But not even deeply religious parents literally accept children *as they come*, as McPherson well knows, since he acknowledges something Sandel calls "transformative love" (2022, p. 20). This, presumably is the form of love that leads to eyeglasses, braces, visits to the dentist, child vitamins, vaccinations, language-learning itself, and stern rebukes to children who stray too close to busy highways. It is also, I should stress, the form of love that leads people to choose Caesarian sections, since children *come* with heads too big for birth canals. If that infant skull size is indeed a "gift," then both birthing mothers and their children should really make sure they keep the receipt.

So, it is not really that we should automatically appreciate children *no matter what* they are naturally like, the idea is that we should selectively appreciate what is genuinely of value of them before seeking to modify them. But again: no one disagrees with that. What proponents of genetic engineering think is that there are various *defects* in nascent human beings that might be corrected using technology, and that this will not involve any serious corresponding loss. McPherson, presumably, does not think that the proposed corrections really would count as improvements, and surely it is right to say that many so-called "defects" may not be defects at all. That is an interesting evaluative debate. But it is a debate between two groups, *both* of whom are trying to make a home in the given world. This is because they are mature human beings, and human beings are homemakers.

Speaking of which, if you're looking for something to brighten up your home, don't let a 3-year-old just repeatedly drag in whatever grime-encrusted plants they happen to have collected outdoors and stuff them willy-nilly into vases. It's not a pretty sight.

NOTES

1 In a footnote, McPherson somewhat cryptically remarks that "I do not think the stances should be seen as separate, and I think the accepting-appreciating stance should be seen as more fundamental" (2022, p. 15n15). 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. To say that A is prioritized over B is just to say that something, intrinsic to A but not to B, is given precedence in decision-making or evaluation. So, if the two stances do not exclude one another in any deep way then the book's controlling idea seems to fall apart.

2 See https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2014/acs/acsbr13-02.pdf.

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