

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/125308/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Webber, Jonathan 2019. Existential flourishing: A phenomenology of the virtues [Book Review]. *Philosophical Quarterly* , -. 10.1093/pq/pqz054

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqz054>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



BOOK REVIEW

Existential Flourishing: A Phenomenology of the Virtues. BY IRENE McMULLIN. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 246. Price £75.00.)

Ethics is the inquiry into how to live our lives well, yet anglophone ethical theory tends to operate with fairly thin conceptions of human life. We are indeed rational animals, social creatures, and capable of pleasure and pain. But we are much more than this. We have goals and projects. We care about the kind of people we are. We have a variety of different relationships with one another. We are raised through a long upbringing in a particular tradition at a specific time and place in history. We think about the past and anticipate the future. We are aware of our mortality and our changing abilities over time. We are dependent on scarce resources for both survival and fulfilment. We are vulnerable to natural forces and human violence. These are not merely occasions of our moral decisions. They are the basic structures of human life. To live a human life well is to flourish as a creature of this complicated kind.

Irene McMullin's excellent new book *Existential Flourishing* recognises the deep ethical significance of this complexity. McMullin draws on the rich literature of European existential phenomenology to explore the basic structures of human life and their significance for living well. Her central thesis is that we are creatures driven by a concern for the meaning of our own existence, which requires each of us to recognise that we are irreducibly both a perspective on the world and an entity within the world, and that we are therefore subject to normative demands arising from our own projects, our relationships with specific other people, and our membership in the overall human community. These three sources of normativity are mutually irreducible, leaving us with the task of harmonising our responses to their competing demands without treating any source as the most important.

McMullin develops her distinctively existential ethical theory in three phases. The first phase outlines her conception of ethical virtue. Chapter 1 argues that practical rationality is ultimately concerned with living well. This requires a deep attunement to the world's demands, a conceptually unarticulated sense of what would constitute success or failure in responding to our situations. Chapter 2 argues that the world's demands are of three fundamentally

distinct kinds: first-person demands arise from our projects, second-person demands arise from our specific relationships, and third-person demands arise from our humanity. McMullin argues that a common error in ethical theorising is to treat one of these kinds as normatively fundamental. Chapter 3 argues that ethical virtues are affective tendencies that help us respond to the three kinds of normative demand given the basic structures of human life. McMullin devotes the third phase of the book to detailing three such virtues. But she ends this first phase by identifying justice as a master virtue concerned with the appropriate distribution of one's responsiveness across the three kinds of normative demand.

The second phase is concerned with the ideal of virtue and with character development towards that ideal. Chapter 4 argues for the unity of the virtues, for minimal deontic constraints on responding to the three kinds of normative demand, and for practical wisdom as the intellectual capacity required to balance those demands. Practical wisdom is therefore the rational ability required to achieve the goals of the affective tendency of justice. Chapter 5 argues that right action is defined by the behaviour of the virtuous person and that role models are therefore indispensable to virtue cultivation. McMullin argues here that character development has three ineliminable aspects, matching the three normative stances: first-person habituation, second-person imitation, and third-person critical reflection. Chapter 6 explores this third-person aspect of virtue cultivation in more detail, arguing that it introduces the critical distance necessary to avoid adopting the values and behavioural styles of bad role models. This argument rests on a careful analysis of the relation between the perceptual and the deliberative aspects of practical reason.

The third phase elucidates this model through analyses of the ethical virtues of patience, modesty, and courage. One might think that each of these virtues concerns one of the three kinds of normative demand, with modesty governing our concern with ourselves, patience governing our relationships with specific people, and courage governing our attitude towards the human condition. McMullin argues that in fact all three virtues are concerned with balancing normative demands of all three kinds. The virtues are distinguished, on her view, by the fundamental structures of human life to which they pertain. Chapter 7 argues that patience is the virtue of dealing appropriately with the temporal boundedness of our existence. Chapter 8 argues that modesty is the virtue of dealing appropriately with human goal-directedness and its significance for an individual's identity and sense of self-worth. Chapter 9 argues that courage is the virtue of dealing appropriately with the fragility of our existence, not only human mortality but also the vulnerability of the abilities, goals, and relationships that we all take to define ourselves.

In its overall theory of ethical virtue and in its analyses of specific virtues, *Existential Flourishing* is an innovative and acutely insightful work of

philosophy. The book admirably exemplifies the virtues of sharply analytical ethical theorising that is sensitive to the complex structures of human existence. It is replete with interesting and perceptive thoughts, developed through detailed engagement with landmark classics of analytic moral philosophy and European existential philosophy. Philosophers interested in ethical theory, existential philosophy, or both will want to engage with this book's substantive arguments and its methodology. In this way, anglophone ethical theory can be further enriched by existential philosophy. Two central aspects of McMullin's overall position in particular invite closer critical consideration, since in their current form they seem under-motivated, perhaps as a result of the philosophical limitation of McMullin's methodology in this book.

One is the claim that human flourishing consists in responding well to the competing normative demands that the world makes. McMullin does not draw on the strand of existential philosophy that emphasises transcending and transforming the world of normative demands rather than merely navigating it. The other is the claim that the three kinds of normative demand are equally authoritative. McMullin does not present much argument for this denial of any hierarchy between the three, or indeed for why we should respect any of their demands. These aspects of her theory perhaps result from her grounding her analysis of the structures of human life in a purely descriptive phenomenology. For a description of the experience of normative demands cannot ground a collective assessment of their authority or significance. McMullin's enterprise would be deepened, therefore, by drawing on the transcendental strand of existential phenomenology. It is perhaps in the factually necessary conditions of our experience of normative demands that we may find firm foundations for an evaluative critique of their authority.

Cardiff University, UK

JONATHAN WEBBER