

Introduction

Human beings seek to transcend limits. This is part of our potential greatness, since it is how we can realize what is best in our humanity. However, the limit-transcending feature of human life is also part of our potential downfall, as it can lead to dehumanization and failure to attain important human goods and to prevent human evils. In this book 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.¹ The limiting virtues that are my focus are humility, reverence, moderation, contentment, neighborliness, and loyalty. These virtues have been underexplored in discussions about virtue ethics, and when they have been explored, it has not been with regard to working out a position on the general issue of the place of limits within a well-lived human life. The account of the limiting virtues provided here, however, is intended as a counter to other prominent approaches to ethics, namely, autonomy-centered approaches and consequentialist (or maximizing) approaches. I develop and defend my account of the limiting virtues in relation to four kinds of limits: (1) existential limits; (2) moral limits; (3) political limits; and (4) economic limits. The four chapters of this 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

¹ The title of this book is intended to have a double meaning. In one sense, “the virtues of limits” is another way of speaking about “the limiting virtues.” However, in another sense, “the virtues of limits” suggests more broadly that there are benefits of recognizing a proper place for limits in human life.

normatively higher, nobler, more meaningful form of life.² In a general sense then all of the virtues—e.g., courage or generosity—can be understood as having a limiting function in so far 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 have mentioned.

Humility can be regarded 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 what—in Chapter 1—I describe as the Promethean tendency to “play God” in seeking mastery over the given world, which is a prominent tendency in the modern world that is seen especially 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 which places strong constraints on our will. As I discuss in Chapter 1, the virtue of reverence 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. In Chapter 2 I develop a Confucian account of the importance of reverence within character formation, and I also argue for its importance for recognizing absolute moral prohibitions.

In Chapter 2 I also put forward an Aristotelian account of the importance of moderation within character formation. Moderation is a limiting virtue because it is concerned with avoiding vicious extremes. It can

² For more on this view, see David McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), ch. 2.

also be understood as a master virtue in so far as the virtues of character consist in realizing a proper mean between excess and deficiency in some feeling or action. However, in Chapter 2 I focus on moderation in the form of temperance and discuss how it enables us not to be enslaved to our animal appetites and makes us receptive to that which is ennobling of our humanity. In Chapter 3 I also discuss the importance of moderation in the political domain as part of a politics of imperfection and how it is especially important for helping us to deal with the problem of conflict within political community.

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—as I discuss in Chapter 1—that we need to find a way to be *at home* in the given world amidst imperfection. This requires that we cultivate a grateful or appreciative orientation toward the world. In Chapter 3 I also discuss the role of contentment in a politics of imperfection and its connection with the sufficientarian account of distributive justice that I defend, where what is important is that people have enough to live well. In Chapter 4 I discuss the importance of contentment for counteracting the vice of greed, and I connect it with a vision of economic life that contributes to being at home in the world.

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. In Chapter 2 I discuss how the virtue of neighborliness, with its focus on concrete rather than abstract humanity, should inform how we think about duties of assistance. In Chapter 3 I also discuss its importance for how we think about the bonds and bounds of political community.

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 which 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 (i.e., for better or for worse). In Chapter 2 I discuss loyalty to friends and family, and in Chapter 3 I discuss patriotism, which involves loyalty to one's country and fellow citizens. In Chapter 1 I also discuss 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. This loyalty to the given provides the wider context in which more particular loyalties find their proper place.

What emerges over the course of the four chapters of this book is a broad and distinctive vision of the good life that recognizes the importance of limits and the limiting virtues for living well as human beings. It is my hope that the broad vision of the good life offered here is one that the reader will find compelling.