

The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce. *By Deirdre N. McCloskey.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xviii + 616 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, figures. Cloth, \$32.50. ISBN: 0-226-55663-8.

Reviewed by Charles Tilly

Promise or threat? At the start of her six-hundred-page book, Deirdre McCloskey announces that it initiates a series of four fat volumes. Only at the end of something like 2.4 thousand pages, it seems, will we know how capitalism succeeded, how it sustained virtuous conduct, how intellectuals turned against it, and why they were wrong to do so. More than five hundred pages into the text, indeed, a six-page postscript outlines how the three coming volumes will make their case. Nevertheless, the volume at hand presents McCloskey's view of capitalism's visible virtues. Given conventional images of capitalism (whether favorable or hostile), those virtues comprise a surprising set: love, faith, hope, courage, temperance, prudence, and justice. Love, faith, and hope, according to McCloskey, count as Christian and feminine virtues; courage and temperance as pagan and masculine virtues; prudence and justice as androgynous virtues, neither Christian nor pagan. Against the idea that greed (or, in greed's Sunday clothes, prudence) alone drives capitalism, McCloskey argues both for capitalism as the underpinning of such bourgeois virtues and for the full compatibility of capitalist competition with the reign of virtue. These views do not, however, align her with political authorities; against the notion that governments mitigate capitalism's worst excesses, McCloskey treats government as a "voracious leviathan." Virtue, she tells us, flourishes in individual liberty, and capitalism promotes individual liberty.

McCloskey's writing style, far from exuding earnest virtue, ironically conveys a view of her subject as riotous fireworks. Especially in the book's opening sections, McCloskey's prose arrives in bursts, alternating abruptly among sententious, solicitous, arch, didactic, coy, stern, frivolous, and preachy. Her text overflows with asides and illustrations from films, fiction, and philosophy. McCloskey also lays on lectures concerning drama, poetry, art, etymology, and history, especially Dutch history. (Extracts from her own mother's poems serve as epigraphs for each of the book's major sections.)

She resists no opportunity to lambaste members of the “clerisy” who have dared to damn the bourgeoisie and to claim that capitalism impoverishes human life. She flays sentimentalists such as Robert Bellah, Robert Putnam, and Richard Sennett for supposing—and regretting—that in the age of advanced capitalism we have lost a world of solidarity and strong interpersonal ties. On the other side, she repeatedly calls out the names of those who have wrongly denied virtue ethics—the systematic elaboration of philosophical principles to guide the good life. One characteristic roll call condemns “the Prudence Only” view of “Callicles or Thrasymachus in Plato, Hobbes (again, on a narrow reading of certain famous passages), Mandeville (no narrowing required), Bentham (throughout), Bonaparte, Talleyrand, Bismarck, Nietzsche (popularized), Justice Holmes, Bertrand Russell, H. L. Mencken (see Nietzsche), Sigmund Freud, Henry Kissinger, Steven Pinker, and Judge Richard Posner of the United States Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals” (p. 394).

To be sure, McCloskey also offers telling critiques of conventional economic analysis, revealing insights into feminist ethical theory, and knowledgeable summaries of Western economic development. She draws on her expertise as an accomplished European economic historian and seasoned analyst of economic rhetoric. She effectively calls attention to the distinctive features of virtue ethics, notably including the virtue ethics of Adam Smith. But those refreshing passages almost dissolve into the surrounding blancmange of secondary topics. Garrulous page after garrulous page, McCloskey’s volume one flits restlessly from one part to another of the philosophical case for capitalism and, especially, its bourgeois virtues.

The case itself rests on an elementary definition of capitalism: any combination of private property, free labor, and rule of law, without central planning but with an ethical consensus. Although McCloskey concentrates on modern, European-style capitalism, such a definition presumably allows readers to make an interesting choice: either to doubt that any true capitalism has ever existed (since rule of law and ethical consensus remain at best uncertain across the capitalist world even today) or (relaxing the criteria for rule of law and ethical consensus) to include in their own evidence for or against bourgeois virtues and really existing capitalism, not only in the United States or France, but also in places of dubious virtuous such as Venezuela, Lebanon, and Nigeria. Capitalism’s

expansion across the world during the last few centuries, McCloskey claims, has produced a startling series of benefits: a dramatic increase in material welfare, longer life, and more ethical behavior.

The book's early sections enumerate those benefits, especially the first two. Almost a hundred pages into her book, McCloskey then turns to a series of reflective, provocative essays on the seven bourgeois virtues, clustered according to their feminine-Christian, pagan-masculine, and androgynous forms. The book's final two-fifths divide more or less evenly between a philosophical synthesis of the seven virtues and a series of applications to contemporary capitalism. The proposed synthesis involves a standard two-dimensional blackboard exercise, in which the vertical dimension runs from sacred and transcendent to profane and self-centered, the horizontal dimension from *Gesellschaft* to *Gemeinschaft*, locating the seven virtues appropriately within the space. I have constructed many such exercises myself before mystified undergraduates, but I fail to see in this case that the scheme either codifies or clarifies. In any case, the blackboard diagram soon disappears, as do dozens of others.

At the start, McCloskey's massive book promises us demonstrations that capitalism generated a bourgeoisie, then that the bourgeoisie installed virtue in public life. Neither demonstration appears in the volume. Both the book's wide historical wandering and McCloskey's delight in unexpected examples scuttle that project. Note McCloskey's exemplars of her seven virtues: Martin Luther King (hope), St. Peter (faith), Emma Goldman (love), Mohandas Gandhi (justice), Achilles or Shane (courage), Socrates or Jane Austen (temperance), and Benjamin Franklin (prudence). No doubt Franklin qualifies as an exemplary capitalist bourgeois, but for the rest, McCloskey's enthusiasm for the virtues eclipses her zeal for pursuit of the book's ostensible argument. Perhaps we must wait for volume four. Succinctness clearly does not figure among the bourgeois virtues.

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