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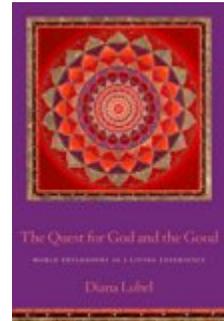
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Diana Lobel. *The Quest for God and the Good: World Philosophy as a Living Experience*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 312 pp. \$82.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15314-0; \$26.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-15315-7.

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In the Beginning There Was the Quest

As the title suggests, Diana Lobel's sensitive study focuses on the quest or the search for meaning as a value in and of itself rather than the end result of any investigation into the ultimate goals of those quests, such as "God" or the "good." This is surely a worthy project and appealing to my own sensibility and interests, as well as, I am certain, to many readers of this review. More often than not I have found the questioning, the struggle, the anxiety laden and determined commitment to the "truth" of those philosophers and theologians I am accustomed to studying far more fascinating and instructive than their ultimate answers. I am especially partial to studies that concentrate on medieval thought, for it was an age when ideas were a matter of life and death rather than some stray thought that can, or must, be captured in 140 characters. After all, if the final determination was really the sole end, what could I gain, for example, from an ancient philosopher's or Maimonides' (d. 1204) "answers," which are anchored in an archaic cosmology populated by spheres and intelligences and a long debunked medieval science? Central to Lobel's entire project then is Charles Taylor's endorsement of the enduring power of ancient myths and images, long abandoned for more scientific descriptions of reality, to inspire and "point toward a moral source, something the contemplation, respect, or love of which enables us to get closer to what is good" (p. 55).

Lobel deals with a wide spectrum of thinkers and

schools of thought, ranging from the ancient Greeks, to medieval, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophers, while stopping along the way to engage seriously the Hebrew Bible, and the foundational texts of Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Though clearly an ambitious project that defies encapsulating in any single book, let alone one of some two hundred pages of text, Lobel manages, in her concentration on the quest, to capture a sense of each and the connective thread that justifies a shared examination in one book. More important is the book's success in placing these disparate theologies, philosophies, beliefs, myths, and attitudes in some kind of dialogue that illuminates what each was precisely after and how each struggled to achieve it. The process thought of Alfred North Whitehead meets Chinese thought; Augustine, al-Ghazali, and al-Farabi shed light on Maimonides, and, on each other; the Upanishads commune with Plato; and the Bhagavad Gita conjures up shades of Aristotle.

There is a certain beauty and existential allure to a medieval cosmos permeated by knowledge, worship of perfection, and existents that overflow with knowledge to lower existents in an unfolding of creation. If a "false" cosmology engenders the kind of *imitatio dei* that consists of acquiring knowledge, which, regardless of its being a means or an end, translates into a way of life that "will always have in view loving kindness, righteousness, and judgment," then perhaps there is much to be val-

ued in how that medieval quest for ultimate knowledge is constructed.[1] Although debatable, as is every other facet of the thought of someone like Maimonides, for Lobel what is essential to its appreciation is the struggle to reconcile the contemplative and active ways of life. As Lobel argues, there is a continuum of thought and struggle with intellectual predecessors who were not necessarily religious compatriots but shared an equal passion for the attainment of the good life. Maimonides picked up on the influential ninth-century Islamic philosopher al-Farabi's portrait of the ideal prophet-philosopher, which did not simply involve self-perfection by cultivating the intellect and realizing a self-contained contemplative existence. The very highest of those mediievally conceived Intellects spurred human beings from their potentiality to actuality. Thus, in a sense, they presented an ethical as well as an intellectual paradigm where care for others, not self-sufficiency, was a critical component of perfection.

Lobel's treatment of Maimonides is bookended by another Islamic philosopher, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) whose purely intellectual life as a student and teacher of theology and religious law was radically disrupted by a Pauline-like revelatory experience which directed his search for meaning toward the Sufis. Their experiential path of mystical ascent led al-Ghazali toward a post-intellectual state where an "inner eye" was opened envisaging some ineffable supra-rational form of knowledge (p. 171). However, he did not remain caught in an otherworldliness with which one often identifies the mystic life. On the contrary, he returned to the active teacher's life, but one thoroughly transformed by his own mystical ascent. As with later kabbalists in the Jewish mystical tradition, al-Ghazali's mystical flight was not an escape at all, but consisted of a round trip journey, returning home to a differently conceived landscape. His involvement with others was now informed by an immediate experience of God.

Lobel returns to Maimonides with what she purports to be a better understanding of Maimonides' own ambiguous constructions of the ideal life. The precise role of social, ethical, political, and pedagogical activity in Maimonides' thought has been, and continues to be, the subject of much passionate scholarly debate. The tenor of the debate itself often mirrors what is at stake for the virtuous life when we reflect on such issues. Yet Maimonides' exegesis of Jacob's ladder, echoing Plato's allegory of the cave, seems to corroborate Lobel's reading more than any other. The angel's, or prophet's, ascent toward self-perfection, is followed by a descent back to

a care for others "with a view to governing and teaching the people of the earth." [2] In other words, intellectual perfection constitutes only half the quest, remaining unfulfilled unless followed by channeling that perfection outward for the benefit of others. The latter consummates the former. Lobel follows this question into Aristotle's own balancing act on *eudaimonia* as either pure theoretical contemplation or a combination of theoretical and moral virtue. She argues persuasively, with the assistance of Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, for an integrated ideal. For MacIntyre there can be no proper conception of virtues without placing them in the context of "an overall life orientation, an overarching good" (p. 148). Likewise, Taylor understands Aristotle's definition of man as a rational being in terms of telos and commitment. To be human is to orient oneself toward the good.

The only part of the book that I found a slight detour from the exciting path along which Lobel guides us is the analogy between Whitehead's metaphysics that accommodates key discoveries of quantum physics and the *Tao Te Ching* of Chinese philosophy. Although I must admit utter ignorance when it comes to subatomic particles (or even atomic for that matter), my skeptical gene is aroused by any synthesizing of post-Newtonian physics and ancient currents of thought. Numerous apologetic attempts to do the same with the Hebrew Bible or kabbalah have perhaps soured me to the enterprise. However, among Lobel's brief excursions into territory foreign to the Western philosophical tradition, such as Chinese and Indian "philosophies," I found her excursion into Buddhism most, to use an apt term, enlightening. In the midst of all this frenzied search for some clearly delineated good, or aspiring for proximity to some ontological reality of a supreme Being, Buddhism offers the humility of the indeterminate. The Buddha does not commit to the "right" position on essential philosophical questions: such as is there a self or not? Is there an ontological reality or is all an illusion? Is the world eternal or created? Is nirvana existence or nonexistence? All these issues are unimportant in regard to a truth that centers on a mode of being characterized by "flexibility, openness, wisdom, and compassion" (p. 110). This conception of "nirvana," Lobel claims, functions like those of the Good and God in other cultures. Though irreconcilable with someone like Maimonides and his construct of a universe anchored in a God, if only even as a first cause, Buddhism and Maimonides might actually converge for all practical purposes on how to play out a human mode of being. Moses can only advance toward God and the Good by "hiding his face" at the burning bush in an act of extreme

intellectual restraint and humility.[3] His life is forever informed by knowledge of a Being one can never know and by a self-effacing posture that veers off from the Aristotelian golden mean to the extreme of selflessness. In this sense, Moses may have qualified as a disciple of the Buddha. After reading Lobel's searching quest for the quest, those who grew up with the late Harry Chapin's ballads will come to appreciate far more profoundly the concluding sentiment of one of them, "It's got to be the going not the getting there that's good." [4]

Notes

[1]. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 638.

[2]. Ibid., 41.

[3]. Ibid., 29.

[4]. "Greyhound," <http://harrychapin.com/music/greyhound.shtml>.

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