

The Quest for God and the Good: World Philosophy as a Living Experience

By Diana Lobel

Columbia University Press, 2011, Pp. xiii+292

ISBN # Pbk: 9780231153157

Pbk \$26.50 (£18.50)

“In all your ways know Him; and He will straighten your paths,” (Pv. 3: 6) asks the author of the Proverbs from the reader. But what are those ways? What are the paths in which one should stride? What does it mean to know or to acknowledge God? The questions raised by this verse are the existential questions that lie at the heart of Diana Lobel’s new book *The Quest for God and the Good*. Although she describes a “quest,” Lobel is opposed to the view that there is a single universal truth to be discovered. Instead, she stresses a pluralistic vision which incorporates many paths and equally as many destinations:

My goal is not to present one truth, but to give the reader an appreciation of diverse ways of approaching these questions, each with its particular point of view, each expressing the integrity of its own system (6).

There is an admirable modesty in this mission statement which is in line with the current understanding of the study of philosophy and religion. As opposed to the idealistic philosophy and the academic study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) in the nineteenth century, today it is much less common for a scholar to suggest an all-encompassing system such as the Hegelian one.

Nonetheless, Lobel’s book is somewhat uncommon in the scholarly world, as it boldly attempts to offer a very broad spectrum of thought. In an age which encourages specialization, she is not afraid to venture into very different fields of thought: from the Bible to the Upanishads, from Augustine to Buddha, and from Maimonides to Alfred Whitehead. The resulting effect is that of a collage: while there are no necessary connections between all the schools of thoughts discussed, Lobel manages to juxtapose different thinkers and create interesting parallels.

In order to allow the different texts speak to one another, Lobel often suggests a novel and sometimes counter-intuitive reading of classical texts. For example, she reads the opening verses of the Hebrew Bible “unadorned” and shows that there is a strong case to be made for the claim that Genesis 1: 1-3 does not describe *creation ex nihilo* as is commonly understood (8-9) – Heaven, earth, void and darkness and the deep are elements which are already there, a fact which might make us “profoundly uncomfortable”, as it suggests that God is not almighty (32). Although there are precedents in Jewish thought to Lobel’s reading, it nonetheless significantly differs from the modern reader’s understanding of the text. But this way of reading is important for Lobel’s

argument, because it allows her to draw a parallel between the Creator God of Genesis and Plato's Demiurge: both do not create from nothing, but rather shape and give order to things. This order is what makes the world good, it is the essence of the verse "and God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1: 4 passim). There are of course differences: whereas God of the Hebrew Bible is responsible for sustaining the existence of the world, the Demiurge is a one-time creator (33).

Another example of Lobel's interpretation style is found in her discussion of Aristotle. A difficult conundrum in Aristotelian philosophy is that of the relation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* between the life of contemplation and the cultivation of other moral virtues as means to *eudaimonia*:¹ is the contemplative life the supreme state to which one should dedicate all his efforts or should life be conducted as a balance between different moral and intellectual virtues? (126). Lobel argues for the latter and justifies her inclusive approach by emphasizing the fact that although contemplation is the highest virtue for Aristotle, it nonetheless must be integrated with other virtues. Thus, she is able to claim that

Aristotle wants us to become aware of the virtues we saw alluded to in the *Tao Te Ching*: knowing when to stop, sensing just how much to give, intuiting when to move forward and when to hold back. Morality is a precious art of attunement, rather than a science (123).

The comparison between the Tao and Aristotelian philosophy, which sounds at first fantastic, is further supported not only by her analysis of the *Nicomachean Ethics* but also by evidence from Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, in which he seems to suggest that acting in the world is integral part of human happiness (136). The *Eudemian Ethics* is considered by most scholars to be an earlier and less developed (132), but Lobel refers to it because in her understanding it supports the claim that views contemplation as activity and not as detachment from the world. The understanding of active life as search for the good which she finds in Aristotle can be seen a characteristic of her own work.

Lobel's active search for God and the good is present in her writing style, which is far from being a detached and uncaring academic discourse. Rather, Lobel tirelessly reminds us that *philo sophia* is the love of wisdom, a love which is not cold but affectionate. The subtitle of her book *World Philosophy as a Living Experience* is meant to make clear that philosophy should not only be theoretically grasped but also realized in one's life, a notion that can be seen as a leitmotif recurring throughout the text. When she comments on the thought of the

¹ *Eudemonia* is a central concept in Aristotelian ethics which is usually translated as "happiness", but sometimes as "well-being". Lobel suggests to think about it as "human fulfillment" (124)

Islamic medieval philosopher al-Ghazzālī, who was inspired by Sufi teaching, Lobel writes that “his experience thus speaks to the power that the knowledge gained in contemplation holds to transform the active life” (172). This can be read not only as an interpretation of al-Ghazzālī’s thought, but also as a motto for the entire book – to pursue good action through contemplation about the meaning of it and the relation between God and the good.

In order to describe this process of contemplation, Lobel uses the metaphors of “quest” and “journey,” which together give a sense of physically looking for something, thus giving the connotation that this search is not just in the realm of ideas (2-3). Read this way, the book itself becomes a journey, in which the reader is invited to become an active participant. But as the term “quest” implies, it is not without perils. The book starts at a very logical point from the standpoint of a Western reader: from the stories of creation in the Hebrew Bible and by Plato. However, from there it rapidly moves to Chinese philosophy, to a discussion of Augustine and Maimonides and back to the East, to Buddhism, only to return to Aristotle and his followers in the Islamic and Judeo-Islamic philosophy during Medieval Era, hence back to Maimonides.

Lobel writes lucidly and often uses everyday examples to convey the meaning of complicated philosophical ideas and she keeps a good part of the discussion for specialized experts in the footnotes. Still, the movement back and forth between times, religions, and schools of thought is sometimes dazzling, despite the connections Lobel creates between ideas. There is a fear of losing the connecting thread between all those different perspectives. But as Walter Benjamin reminds us, to truly lose oneself on the way requires schooling.² Perhaps being lost is in itself part of the intellectual journey, which is not necessarily straightforward; one has to let go of old presuppositions and be willing to be lost in new realms of thought. Luckily, the book has a [website](#), which recommends editions of the primary texts to be used as well as lists of questions for instructed reading. In this way, the reader can follow the primary sources which underlie Lobel’s argument and develop one’s own thoughts on the subject. This is a blessed initiative, but it might have been more effective if this useful apparatus would have been a more integral part of the book.

An exemplary question which remains unanswered concerns Lobel’s choice of texts: why discuss Zen Buddhism and not Tibetan Buddhism? Why Augustine and not Aquinas or Luther? Where are the Indigenous People traditions? Lobel provides no justification for her preference of specific authors. Nonetheless, some tendencies can be identified: first and foremost, there is a clear reliance in the

² Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 53.

book on classical texts—albeit often with new interpretations—such as Plato, Aristotle, the Hebrew Bible and the *Bhagvad Gita*. She believes that the classics, and the medieval thought that in many ways follows from them,³ are still relevant for the contemporary reader because they suggest untimely insights that serve to illuminate various aspects of human thought and experience. To show the relevance of these texts to contemporary discussions, Lobel also incorporates contemporary philosophers, thus showing the extent to which ancient traditions shaped or influenced contemporary thought: Iris Murdoch is discussed as a modern Platonist, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre as Aristotelians, and Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy is paired with Chinese thought. In this way, she encourages the reader to reflect on the ancient texts as well as on her own time in the search of God and the good.

Considering the breadth of Lobel's work, the absence of discussion of the modern period is surprising; there is a gap in her discussion between medieval thought and the contemporary. Modernity and the Enlightenment are discussed only in bypass and there is no representation for rationalism, idealism or empiricism. The almost hidden presence of Kant, perhaps the most influential thinker since the eighteenth century, is revealing in this context: his thought is mentioned only as the backdrop against which modern Platonist and modern Aristotelians respond (146-149). The decision to mostly disregard the modern period seems to stem from the focus of Lobel's inquiry. She attempts to reconstruct the lived and experienced character of philosophy and finds it more lucidly in the Eastern, ancient and medieval philosophy than by thinkers such as Kant and Hegel, with their systems that are perceived as rigid.

There might be another reason why the modern period is not discussed in Lobel's book. As the title of her book suggests, Lobel seeks to determine the connection between God and the good. She does not ignore the presence of evil in her discussions, but rather analyzes it in relation to the good. In other words, her argument in understanding evil is inherently connected, like yin and yang, to her analysis of the good. When discussing Augustine and Maimonides, she shows how both thinkers understand evil in relation to creation: since creation is good, evil is non-being, "metaphysical evil is simply the lack of being and reality" (85). Moral evil, however, has a different cause but it is still presented in contrast to the

³ The many Medieval thinkers discussed, such as Maimonides, al-Ghazzālī, and Al-Farabi, reflect Lobel's own specialty in the field of religious thought, see her previous books *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000) and *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

good: for Augustine it is the corruption of our originally good will and for Maimonides it is caused by deprivation of knowledge about the ways of God (ibid).

In contrast to the vision presented by Lobel, however, the history of modern philosophy is not a search for the good but rather an attempt to come to terms with evil. As Susan Neiman showed in her work *Evil in Modern Thought*, modern philosophy is stamped by its desire at least to come to terms, if not fully explain, events which are considered as evil. This is true for natural evils such as the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 and for moral evils such as Auschwitz. In fact, the distinction between the two kinds of evils is according to Neiman itself part of the debate in modern philosophy and should be read in this historical context.⁴ She thus suggests that in order to understand the history of philosophy, especially since modernity, the search for evil is better than the alternative historiographies: “it is more inclusive, comprehending a far greater number of texts; more faithful to their authors’ stated intentions; and more interesting”.⁵

While Lobel does not try to write a history of philosophy, Neiman’s keen analysis of modern philosophy might explain why Lobel does not include thinkers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Her objective is different; Lobel is less interested in answering the question of evil, so crucial to that period. Instead, she wishes to present to the reader a colorful rainbow of thought in all its glory, “each approach we explore adds a color to the spectrum, a dimension without which the whole would be incomplete” (188). Rather than offering a full philosophical account, Lobel wishes to draw our attention to the joys of contemplation. She offers a multitude of perspectives because of her belief that by contemplating the existential questions of God and the good, we cultivate ourselves: “to recognize the beauty and wisdom of each perspective expands our vision both as spiritual seekers and as moral agents” (ibid). With this emphasis on the quest and our virtue as moral agents, she can be seen as fostering a philosophy of virtue, hence her inclusion of contemporary philosophers such as MacIntyre. Understood this way, her work can be thought of as an exercise in philosophy of aspiration: rather than trying to understand certain universal moral laws, her work deals with self-improvement through learning. This aspiration is infinite; the quest is long, because there are always more perspectives to learn, the task is never ending. The poet Cavafy formulated this idea beautifully in his poem “Ithaka”:

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

⁴ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 8.

⁵ Ibid, 7.

Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.⁶

The journey is more important than the arrival to the city. Lobel's *Quest for God and the Good* is about the travel, not the destination; it is about raising the questions, not answering them once and for all.

University of Toronto
Yaniv Feller

⁶ C.P. Cavafy, "Ithaka," in *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, ed. George Savidis, trans. Edmund Kelley and Phillip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36-37.