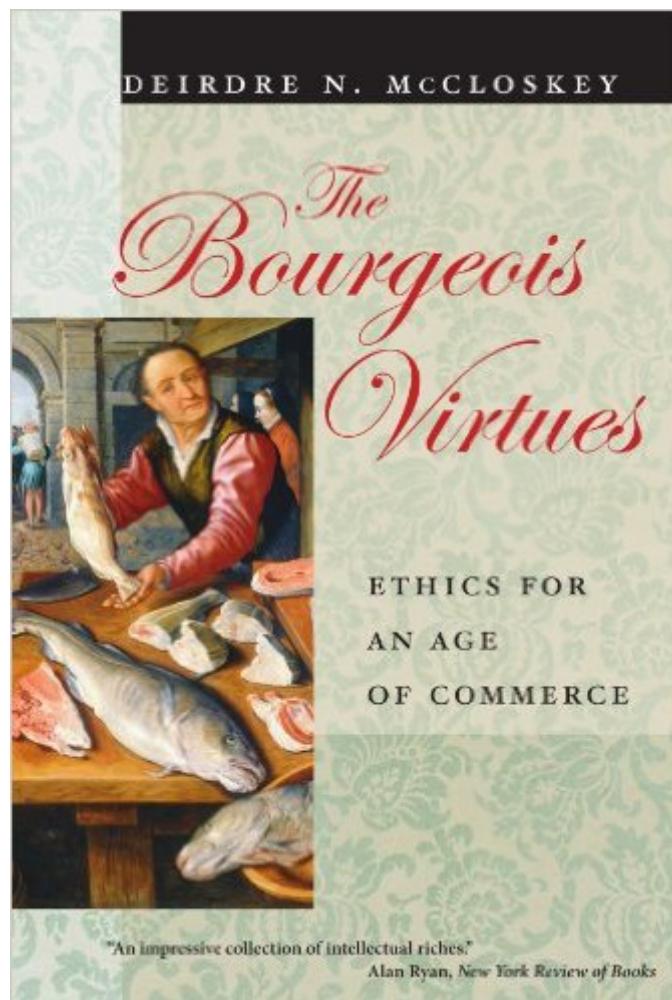


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The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics For An Age Of Commerce



Synopsis

For a century and a half, the artists and intellectuals of Europe have scorned the bourgeoisie. And for a millennium and a half, the philosophers and theologians of Europe have scorned the marketplace. The bourgeois life, capitalism, Mencken's "œboobooisie" and David Brooks's "œbobos" all have been, and still are, framed as being responsible for everything from financial to moral poverty, world wars, and spiritual desuetude. Countering these centuries of assumptions and unexamined thinking is Deirdre McCloskey's *The Bourgeois Virtues*, a magnum opus that offers a radical view: capitalism is good for us. McCloskey's sweeping, charming, and even humorous survey of ethical thought and economic realities "from Plato to Barbara Ehrenreich" overturns every assumption we have about being bourgeois. Can you be virtuous and bourgeois? Do markets improve ethics? Has capitalism made us better as well as richer? Yes, yes, and yes, argues McCloskey, who takes on centuries of capitalism's critics with her erudition and sheer scope of knowledge. Applying a new tradition of "œvirtue ethics" to our lives in modern economies, she affirms American capitalism without ignoring its faults and celebrates the bourgeois lives we actually live, without supposing that they must be lives without ethical foundations. High Noon, Kant, Bill Murray, the modern novel, van Gogh, and of course economics and the economy all come into play in a book that can only be described as a monumental project and a life's work. *The Bourgeois Virtues* is nothing less than a dazzling reinterpretation of Western intellectual history, a dead-serious reply to the critics of capitalism and a surprising page-turner.

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Customer Reviews

I find reviews very irksome when the reviewer states that the author of the book under review has failed miserably because he or she has not said what the reviewer would say had the reviewer written the book. Such reviews are as self-serving as they are silly and if I lapse into such here please dismiss my comments. *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* is at 508 pages a hefty work but it is in fact just the first of four books Professor McCloskey has planned to write on our attitudes toward how we earn a living. I am not among those McCloskey sees as her primary audience--the romantic, anti-capitalist clerisy--for I admire the bourgeoisie and capitalism. Indeed, my heroes are foremost among McCloskey's heroes--Montesquieu, David Hume, and especially Adam Smith. Yet I believe that McCloskey fails to achieve her aims of defending capitalism and bourgeois character. She does so in a way that may actually escape attention as one reads this sometimes engaging but often tedious and very long book. The book seeks to defend "virtue ethics" against Kantian, utilitarian and contractarian ethical theories and it provides a catalogue of seven "bourgeois" virtues--love, faith, hope, courage, temperance, prudence and justice. The first three virtues McCloskey associates more with women than men and she acknowledges the obvious fact that they are essentially the Christian, "sacred" virtues. The other four virtues she associates more with men than women but they are even older than the sacred virtues because they were identified and described by the ancient, pagan Greeks and Romans. So, descriptions of the "bourgeois" virtues predate the bourgeois era by some 1800 years or more.

McCloskey says re why the West suddenly in the past 200 years become rich: "I claim that the modern world was made by a new, faithful dignity accorded to the bourgeois - in assuming its proper place -and by a new, hopeful liberty - in venturing forth. To assume one's place and to venture: dignity and liberty. "Dignity and liberty work. By now we should have ceased being shocked by their efficacy. The special development zone of Shenzhen, a suburb of Hong Kong went from being a small fishing village to an 8 million soul metropolis in two decades. True, it didn't happen without some nasty rent-seeking by party officials and their friends. But out of such creative destruction average incomes dramatically raised. Such a feat required a shift in rhetoric: stop jailing millionaires and start admiring them; stop resisting creative destruction and start speaking well of innovation; stop over-regulating markets and start letting people make deals, corrupt or not.

THE OLD VIEW OF THE BOURGEOISIE Until the view of the bourgeoisie suddenly changed in academic circles in Spain, then in commercial and (some) political circles in Holland and then in Britain and the United States, dignity and liberty for the bourgeoisie was viewed as an outrageous absurdity. Of course, the bourgeoisie was contemptible!! In Confucianism the 4th and lowest of the

social classes is the merchant, only just on a par with the carriers of night-soil; or in Christianity, the camel having a better chance of passing through the eye of the needle than a rich man entering heaven.' Around 1700, for the first time ever, deals to buy spices (or steam engines) low and sell them high were admired. The admiration overturned various anti-bourgeois stereotypes which had so long prevailed

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