



Insight Series

**Harnessing Wisdom
to Slay the Dragons of
Modernity: Review of
A Time for Wisdom by
McLaughlin and
McMinn**

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Slaying Dragons

A Time for Wisdom: Knowledge, Detachment, Tranquility, Transcendence (Templeton Press, 2022) is written by two psychologists, Paul T. McLaughlin and Mark R. McMinn, the first of whom also has a background in philosophy and religious studies. This is not, first and foremost, a book for fellow academics but for a more general, intellectually minded, readership. It is better grounded theoretically and informed empirically than most standard self-help books, but it is more eclectic, encompassing, and digressive than typical academic monographs.

Our first observation is that this book makes for a compelling read. We strongly recommend it as food for thought for those worrying about some of the “dragons of modernity,” identified below. Academics tend to be curmudgeonly in reviews and proprietary of their preferred theoretical standpoints. We cannot fully avoid those “occupational hazards”. We wish, therefore, to preface any critical comments with the overall view that, in addition to being unputdownable as an evening read, this work advances the discourse on some of the topics it covers. Most importantly, it closes some remaining gaps in the recent discourse on wisdom in psychology. However, it may do so at the cost of opening up others.

The authors set the bar high at the outset. They proclaim their work to be “a dangerous book” that, in an era of increasing ideological polarization, will challenge readers’ comfort zones and shake them out of their self-chosen “fortresses” (p. 4). The authors see these fortresses as tenaciously guarded by what they consider the dragons of modernity: “ego inflation, sense of entitlement, power seeking, lack of empathy, and preoccupation with ideals of beauty and success” (p. 155): all of which can be considered traits of narcissism, unbridled individualism, or what Iris Murdoch called “the fat relentless ego.” As an antidote the authors offer a modified version of some recent psychological accounts of wisdom, as well as a developmental path to wisdom through what they call the “KDTT model” of knowledge, detachment, tranquility, and transcendence (p. 27).

Wisdom and Its Components: Closing and Opening Gaps

Psychologists have been studying wisdom vigorously since the 1980s, and this book would be unimaginable without that background and context. A lingering worry about the psychological discourse about wisdom has been that it conflates different senses of wisdom, as defined originally by the ancient Greeks: *sophia* (theoretical wisdom), *phronesis* (practical wisdom in the ethical sphere), and *techné* (technical expertise). In order to ameliorate this shortcoming in the literature, Igor Grossmann brought together an international “task force” of wisdom experts to create a “consensual model”, published 2020 in *Psychological Inquiry*. In our view, the “task force” has advanced the discourse considerably and made it more practicable, by moving the specification of wisdom closer to *phronesis* (as defined by Aristotle) and away from both *sophia* and *techné* (see a critical overview by Kristjánsson *et al.*, in *Review of General Psychology*, 2021). Yet the downside of any consensual model is that it tends to elide controversial issues, and McLaughlin and McMinn cleverly put their fingers on areas where Grossmann *et al.*’s model may fall short. It does not account for emotional maturity as an aspect of wisdom; it fails to endorse an ontologically realist view of the knowledge that must undergird wisdom; and in coming closer to Aristotle’s disenchanting view of wisdom, it severs the link between wisdom and self-transcendence.

Some of the strongest arguments in this new book aim at retrieving views of emotions, objective knowledge, and spiritual awe that close the gaps opened up by the consensual model. We applaud those arguments, and we are intrigued by all the examples from ancient wisdoms and modern life that the authors elicit to support them.

However, we worry that in closing some gaps the authors may have opened up others. Consider their own definition of wisdom as “an (1) embodied (2) disposition or act involving (3) critical contemplation, (4) purgation and purification of knowledge with practical implications, (5) leading to self-transcendence, tranquility, and elevated insight” (p. 13). Notably missing from this definition is the feature that we consider the crowning glory of the Grossmann *et al.* model: the assumption that any wise act needs to be informed by *moral* constraints. We are surprised by the conspicuous absence of the word “moral” from this book in general, although it may at times be euphemistically replaced by other terms, such as “criticality,” “purgation,” and “deeply held values,” which arguably have no traction without a moral dimension.

We also worry slightly about the extreme theoretical ecumenism underlying the spelling out of some of the authors’ core concepts. For example, although they expose some of the weaknesses of Buddhist mindfulness, their definitions of both “tranquility” and “detachment” sometimes seem to take in some of the insights that they otherwise denounce, such as that “you are not your thoughts and feelings” (p. 121). If my feelings and thoughts are not part of who I am deep down, then who am I?

Concluding Remarks

Despite some of the concerns we have raised above, we found this book to be a fascinating read. For readers with an academic background, it may help to set some of the standard assumptions from academia aside – such as about conceptual economy and theoretical parsimony.

The authors take readers on a rollercoaster ride through a thick and dense woodland where there is no shortage of different kinds of trees and other vegetation. While their professed aim is that of uprooting some of the weed – which they sometimes express by way of the metaphor of “slaying dragons” – this book is best read as an intellectual eye-opener. The authors forge connections between ideas that readers had previously seen as separate, and while the book is too exciting to contribute much to the ideals of tranquility and detachment, it does help to cultivate knowledge and transcendence in readers who approach it with an unprejudiced mind.



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