

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – A Decent Life

Reviewer name: Scott Main

Book title: A Decent Life

Author name: Todd May

Genre: Moral philosophy

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: There has been a long standing tension within religious outlooks over the centuries. This is between embracing the world and denying it.

Ascetics within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam consider the world corrupted and tainted with sin, that it is literally and metaphorically filthy. It makes perfect sense on this account to detach oneself, live in a remote place and renounce all the desires and pleasures of the world in the mission of getting closer to the divine. So we observe the story of the desert fathers of early Christianity

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_Fathers) and the whole monastic tradition (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monasticism>). Buddhism and contemplative traditions in Hinduism also advocate detachment and the renunciation of worldly desire. This was also the tack taken by the Gnostics (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism>).

A parallel tradition stresses texts such as Genesis 1:31 'And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day'. Following this, believers take it that they should engage fully with the world whilst acknowledging its many imperfections and manifest suffering. The task here is to express the love of the divine by participating in the world.

When it comes to setting moral standards based on these ethical visions, the former path can seem unrealistically demanding to many in our modern Western consumer culture. We read the following in Luke 18:22 'Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me'. Do without the latest high spec motor car? No way. Do without 3 foreign holidays a year (contributing to global warming by consuming enormous amounts of jet fuel in the process)? No way. Eschew procreation? Too late. Do without meat, fine dining, sex, a myriad of distracting entertainment? Forget it. Give up the yacht moored at James Watt Dock? You cannot be serious!

Should you feel that moral respectability must be possible without making any sacrifices or compromises, Todd May's 2019 book 'A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us' could be for you. Even if we gave away everything we own and devoted ourselves to good works, it wouldn't solve all the world's problems. Can we lead a fundamentally decent life without taking such drastic steps? Todd May (<http://www.clemson.edu/caah/departments/philosophy-religion/people/facultyBio.html?id=386>) is not the sort of philosopher who tells us we have to be model citizens who display perfect ethics in every decision we make. He's realistic: he understands that living up to ideals is a constant struggle. May leads his readers through the traditional philosophical bases of a number of arguments about what morality demands of us, then he develops a more reasonable and achievable way of thinking about them, one that shows us how we can use philosophical insights to participate in the complicated world around us. He explores how we should approach the many relationships in our lives – with friends, family, animals, people in need –

through the use of a more forgiving, if no less fundamentally serious, moral compass. With humour, insight, and a lively, accessible style, May opens a discussion about how we can, realistically, lead the good life whilst satisfying all our desires at the same time. After all, a philosophy of goodness that is unattainable is ultimately self-defeating. Surely? See if you agree.

What you liked: Todd May offers an ethical vision for those of us who are not saints

Who should read this book?: Anyone interested in ethics

Any additional comments?: 232 pages in University of Chicago Press

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