Bruce J. MacLennan

The Wisdom of Hypatia: Ancient Spiritual Practices for a More Meaningful Life.

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The Wisdom of Hypatia: Ancient Spiritual Practices for a More Meaningful Life by B. J. MacLennan is impressive in its scope and structure. The twelve chapters of this work are organized in four parts: I, *Preliminaries* (chapters 1-3); II, *The First Degree of Wisdom* (chapter 4), symbolized by the Garden and represented by Epicureanism, which seeks “tranquility through moderating the desires” (5); III, *The Second Degree of Wisdom* (chapters 5-7), symbolized by the Porch and represented by Stoicism (Zeno of Citium, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, etc.), which seeks “freedom and serenity through detachment from the things outside our control” (5); and IV, *The Third Degree of Wisdom* (chapters 8-12), symbolized by the Grove and represented by Hypatia’s Platonism (Plato, Plotinus, etc.) (5). Each degree of wisdom is directed towards its unique characteristic “joyous tranquility”—*ataraxia* (Epicurean), *apatheia* (Stoic), and *hêsychia* (Neoplatonic) (139). In Parts II-IV the author is imaginative enough to insert the voices of philosophical characters (mainly Hypatia, but also Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, and others) as channels of philosophical teachings and discourses, even as he presents central ideas of Epicureanism (atoms and the void, tranquility, fear of death, the *Tetrapharmakos*, etc.), Stoicism (Stoic goals, nature, wisdom *qua* three fundamental disciplines of assent, impulse, and desire, etc.), and Neoplatonism (the macrocosm in terms of the world body, world mind, the Platonic Forms, the “Inexpressible One,” etc., and the microcosm in terms of the tripartite soul, one’s Shadow, the deity within, etc.) respectively. Part IV is particularly impressive in its detailed focus on the macrocosm, its mirroring microcosm, and in its advanced spiritual practices of *unio mystica* through three paths of ascent, each with its “four initiatory stages corresponding to the four levels of the Tetractys” (203)—namely, the paths of love, truth, and trust. Besides copious endnotes, this work also provides additional readings and a glossary of terms.

One sign of the crisis of our times is the fact that western philosophy has lost its practical value as a spiritual panacea for the soul. We have forgotten these maxims cited by MacLennan: “A philosopher’s words are empty if they do not heal the suffering of mankind” (Epicurus, 69) and “Do not shun practicing, but avoid discussing, for the long road to happiness is through words, but the short way is through the daily practice of deeds” (Crates, 75). To render the tradition of “spiritual practice and understanding that lives hidden in the heart of Western culture” (4) accessible to a postmodern western audience, lost in science, technology, politics, therapy, and religious experimentation is

a formidable task. It is precisely this gap that MacLennan seeks to bridge. The “Inexpressible One,” he says, *can* “cohabit with a scientific worldview” (161). The “conception of The One,” understood as the cause of “*all* phenomena in the universe,” he says, could be called, “the God of the scientists” (161). “Our goal,” he says, “is wisdom” (4) and the soul’s “*spiritual transformation*” (5), the path to wisdom being cumulative (4). Like most ancient philosophers, Hypatia, the Neoplatonic philosopher, whose name means “highest” or “supreme” (13), taught “a *way of life*, not an academic subject to be studied but not practiced” (12). The author’s own approach to philosophy is accordingly. He sees philosophy as “a way of life, not an accomplishment” (6) with self-mastery as its corner-stone (26). Given this pragmatism, Hypatia, “the most holy and revered philosopher” (8) was a perfect choice for the character of the philosophical “guide” in this work.

The “path of spiritual development” (8) laid out by MacLennan is at once theoretical *and* practical. He exposes lay audiences to the sublime flights of western philosophy (from Epicurean atomism to Neoplatonic cosmology, etc.), using standard academic tools like citations, quotations, a historical timeline (29), and map (30). But he also includes practice-oriented tools like these—the thirteen spiritual practices for concentrating inward, expanding outward, etc. (25); psycho-spiritual exercises like classifying one’s desires (50, 52), applying Epicurean calculation to modern conveniences (51), and meditating on one’s own feelings about death (61); and visual meditations like the “Geocentric” ascent (165) and descent (166), and the “Journey to the Central Fire” (167-9). When it comes to the different logical levels of Neoplatonic reality, MacLennan is impressive in his use of diagrams to represent these variegated levels—through the four “Planes of Reality” (162), the “Tetractys” (162), the “Geocentric” image (164), and the “Central Light” image (167). Yet, he is also rigorous enough to remind us that the “models or metaphors” (170) used by Pagan Neoplatonists can “mislead” (170) as can the diagrams he uses, for these levels are differentiated *ontologically*—not spatially, nor temporally.

MacLennan uses a personable, gently-didactic style of writing, without diluting the rigor of his exposition of the intricate philosophical concepts at the heart of western philosophy. The strength of this work lies in his use of contemporary symbols and metaphors drawn from science, technology, and modern western religious experimentation, while at the same time, drawing subtle distinctions between wisdom and science. Thus he distinguishes between the spiritual and technical dimensions of numbers in reference to Pythagorean philosophy (32), and between the ancient Greek *atomon* (indivisible thing) and the breakable atom of modern physics, so that the Greek

atomon should be translated “elementary particle” (46). In Part IV he explains how the “Neoplatonic map of inner and outer reality can illuminate the beliefs of both polytheistic Pagans and monotheists,” being “valuable” also for “agnostics and nonbelievers”—for it is an “accurate map of the psyche irrespective of the transcendent existence of deities” (173). He also explains the connection between Neoplatonism and contemporary evolutionary Jungian psychology (173).

Yet, given the ambitious scope of this work, it is to be expected that some concepts will lose their rigor in the attempt to make them accessible. Thus MacLennan’s suggestion—that the Neoplatonic *nous* is the “*intuiting mind*” (175), as if “intuition” transpires outside time—seems untenable. So does his omission of Plotinus’ intricate genus-species edifice of soul in the context of emanation, when the voice of Hypatia contends that the hypostasis soul (“Cosmic Soul as a whole”) is a “temporal unfolding” of Intellect (“Cosmic Mind”) (154). Although he distinguishes between the eternal (*qua* “out of time”) and the sempiternal (*qua* “living forever”) (176), MacLennan appears to conflate the two when he describes the laws of physics as “eternal” (148) and likewise, when he claims that “biological species can be understood as ideal Forms” (146). Indeed, laws and species appear to endure over time. But they are too immanent to be described as eternal. Inasmuch as they manifest themselves across time, laws and species can, at best, be sempiternal. They would alter if their corresponding eternal (and therefore anterior) ideal forms were to decree so. Notwithstanding his sophisticated distinctions between wisdom and modern western science, MacLennan sometimes does not distinguish the two enough. He does not state *this* key difference—namely, *wisdom and science operate in wholly different media*. For wisdom transcends altogether the sphere of the corporeal to which science is confined. This affects some of the analogies he draws—such as that between Epicurus’ “atoms of the soul,” and the “contemporary scientific view” that “the mind is nothing but the electrochemical activity of the brain” (47). This allows him to make incompatible adjudications—such as the notion that some of Stoic natural science is false from the perspective of contemporary science (104). Again, when the author suggests that our growing understanding of neuropsychology must inform our views of the afterlife (59), adding that “our mental lives are highly dependent on the brain,” (59), he appears to neglect *this* chief maxim of wisdom, that it is *mind that rules over matter*—not vice versa, although he does add that “some have argued that the brain acts more as a *receiver* of the mind than as its *generator*,” so that the mind could exist without the brain (60). But this does not go far enough. It does not assert the full power of mind over matter.

MacLennan's perspective of spirituality, which he sees somewhat as a training, could be less technical and more realistic. He designs a "nine-month program of spiritual growth" (7), mapping the three degrees of wisdom, as something "reasonable for most people" (6). But true spiritual development cannot be scheduled, for it is unexpected and unique to each individual—involving arduous acts of expiation that may entail multiple lifespans in the cycle of reincarnation. Nor does MacLennan discern adequately between the discursive and the trans-discursive—a distinction of paramount significance to his project—even though he distinguishes between "intellectual system" and spiritual practice (3-4). For the discursive can do no more than merely adumbrate the silent sphere of the trans-discursive. At best, it *indicates* the trans-discursive. When intellectually inspiring, the discursive *can* reveal a higher awareness, but does not necessarily possess the expiatory power essential for the actual unfolding of being. Nor do psycho-spiritual exercises possess this power. Unlike intellectual activity, which is primarily discursive, spiritual growth is a largely silent trans-discursive unfolding of one's very being.

Despite these minor problems, this work remains impressive in the sheer breadth of sources made accessible to lay audiences among whom MacLennan includes contemporary Pagans (likened to Pythagoras, Plato, Hypatia, and other ancient Pagans), those who are Wiccan, and those who follow one of the "religions of the book" (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) (16)—that is, those seeking "a deeper experience of the sacred and a spiritually more enlightened life" (16). MacLennan is to be commended also for his generous penchant for the universal that removes the stigma of postcolonial snobbery from scholars of western philosophical classics. Thus he includes among the blessed spirits and *daimons*, "the saints, the wise and holy people of all cultures" (Pythagoras, Plato, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, etc.) (168). Although rooted in western philosophy, MacLennan is yet global and egalitarian in his coverage of wisdom traditions world-wide and untiring in his synthesis of diverse traditions. Thus, he asserts that "age-old methods of spiritual guidance that have evolved independently in different cultural contexts... are repeatedly rediscovered because they work" (16-17). He synthesizes the two broad approaches to becoming god-like (outward and inward) as two paths that lead to the "same place" (17). He discovers *shamanic* ideas in Orphism (31), characterizing Pythagoras as being *shaman*-like (31) and tracing Greek *shamanism* to the Persian Magi (32). Finally, he traces the lineage of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish mysticism and theology to Neoplatonism (38-39).

In the end this work is valuable because MacLennan emancipates philosophy itself from the straitjacket of rigid-cold intellectualism, even as he emancipates the reader from the stranglehold of scientism.

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