

Designed for Good: Recovering the Idea, Language, and Practice of Virtue

Kevin J. Brown

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Why be moral? All moral agents struggle with this question, implicitly or explicitly, throughout their lives. *Why* ought I act in a moral way—and the resulting questions: *What* is that moral way according to which I ought to act? *Who* am I becoming? Am I fulfilling my intended purpose?

As Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor posits, our modern social imaginary allows us to answer these questions in a new way. Questions of transcendence are now optional; we can be our own meaning makers. Some of the modern answers to the question “why be moral?” including the colloquial “you do you” or “live *your* truth” highlight the particular pathologies of our secular age in poignant ways.

It is for this age that Kevin J. Brown, Associate Professor of Business at Asbury University, writes. *Designed for Good: Recovering the Idea, Language, and Practice of Virtue* is a timely work that seeks to rediscover virtue in an age dominated by, in Brown’s words, efficiency, equity, and enforceability. He seeks to describe a vision of the good life, one in pursuit of goodness and wholeness in line with God’s design. Following classical virtue ethics, Brown focuses on the character of the moral agent; the question is not primarily what we should *do*, but who we ought to *be*. *Designed for Good* covers an astounding amount of material in a refreshing and approachable manner. Brown’s helpful, concise summaries of complex ideas and his engaging, interdisciplinary examples—from ecclesial life to economics, politics to pop culture, and more—distill difficult, often misunderstood, concepts in a winsome way.

Quoting Pope John Paul II, Brown writes, the “essential bond between Truth, the Good, and Freedom has been largely lost sight of by present-day culture” (16). This observation begets a challenge for the church: to rediscover and rearticulate these connections. Brown’s project, simply put, is to invite the reader into a discovery of the *good*; he aims to show that the virtuous life, a life seeking the good, is the best life.

Brown argues that in moral discourse today, we—this book draws from, and speaks into, primarily American data—desire to be good, but do not agree on what “good” means. In many cases, what “feels right” has eclipsed an objective moral order. In the absence of an agreed upon overarching moral order, we are left with three primary paradigms for determining the good: efficiency, equity, and enforceability. Brown outlines these guiding principles with clarity, detailing the ways in which these paradigms can aid us as we navigate questions of the good, but also how they are incomplete means to fully understand the good, right, and true. Rather, the idea and practice of virtue ought to be our guide. Against the ethos of our age, Brown shifts the locus of moral authority away from the autonomous individual to an objective moral order: God’s created design, in which we are invited to participate. Our goal is to “discover, embrace, and embody the good through the education of our sentiments, or learning to desire well” (100).

A life of virtue requires practices of virtue. Brown grounds these practices in the words of Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?” (NIV). By understanding and embodying these virtues—justice, mercy, and humility—we can cultivate a more virtuous self. Brown names specific practices (generosity, charitable judgment, steadfast love, agreement, and works of mercy) that, when practiced, can cultivate virtue.

Designed for Good combines insights from theology, sociology, economics, politics, and philosophy as it guides readers in seeking answers to questions like “Who am I becoming?”; “Am I fulfilling my intended purpose?”; or “What is virtue?” But in the second half of the book, Brown takes an explicitly theological turn. Drawing on theologians such as C. S. Lewis, Richard B. Hays, and Miroslav Volf, Brown discusses virtue in light of the Christian metanarrative. Christians, enacting practices that shape us in the ways of virtue, the way that is in accord with God’s design, will ever grow in godliness, that is, “holy love and ordered desire” (177). These disciplines shape us, but the onus is not merely on the believer. Faith, the work of God in the life of the Christian, propels the Christian toward these disciplines, which continue to form persons of faith. Embodying virtue cannot occur without God’s grace.

In his final, brief chapter, Brown returns to the original question, “Why be moral?” Here, he briefly discusses different answers to this question: pragmatism, divine command, and—his preferred answer—teleological morality. We practice virtue because that is what we were created to do. We are, as the title suggests, designed for good.

Brown argues for a “teleological morality,” “virtue motivated by design” (193). His reflections focus on the *telos* of the human life, answering the question, “What is our purpose?” To this question, he answers, we were designed for good. One of Brown’s recurring images, which he borrows from Aristotle, is that of a flute. To those who know what it is, the flute’s design is obvious; it ought to be used to make beautiful music. No one who fully understands the purpose of a flute would argue that the instrument should be given to the person who, for example, desires to use it as a rolling pin, rather than to the award-winning flutist who can use it for its designed function. As Brown says, “expertly crafted flutes are made for expertly trained flutists” (78). To know whether a flute is being used well, one must know its purpose.

To press Brown’s example, though, one does not simply pick up a flute and immediately make beautiful music. One needs to know the basics of music, which requires spending long hours mastering scales, learning technique, reading music, and more. You cannot simply pick up a flute and intuitively know how to play a G-flat major scale or Telemann’s Fantasias. Similarly, we cannot simply know the broad strokes of our creativeness; virtue motivated by design must properly distill both design and purpose, which are necessarily intertwined. This, of course, is Brown’s point. Already in the title, he emphasizes the need to understand design, to look not only to teleology, but to protology. But the book itself spends far more time discussing our *telos* than our beginning. This is not to say that Brown entirely forfeits a discussion of design and creation. In chapter 5,

Brown concretely lays out what humans were created to do: act justly, love mercy, walk humbly. But, without the specifics of creational theology, it is difficult to know exactly what constitutes important concepts like mercy and love. Brown's primary point in this chapter, that our practices *form* us in significant ways, is profound and important. Later, Brown draws on Augustine's understanding of the need for properly ordered desires, but an important question remains: What is the order to which our desires ought to be directed? Brown is clear that there *is* an order, and this order is rooted in God's character, but the specifics of the order remain unclear, thus rendering some of the practices of virtue able to be interpreted in multiple directions.

In this widely sourced, highly accessibly book, Brown has created a helpful resource for students, church groups, and others to engage in important moral reflection and action. The widely sourced nature of the book attests to Brown's proficiency in disciplines outside of his primary discipline, business. There are short sections, both on the prohibitions inherent in law and an exposition of divine command theory, where some inclined to an ethic based primarily on law may find themselves wishing for a more nuanced rendering of their position. But, the introductory nature of this work perhaps precludes detailed discussions of each topic that is addressed.

Designed for Good is a valuable guide for those that desire a framework for pursuing virtue in our secular age. Through his engaging prose and compelling examples Brown presents an invigorating vision of the virtuous life. *Designed for Good* is highly practical and full of wisdom for our time.

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Undomesticated Dissent: Democracy and the Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity

Curtis W. Freeman

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When one chooses a topic that is centered around nonconformity, anarchism, resistance, symbolism, and subversion, one runs the risk of a disordered narrative, but also gains the possibility of breaking new ground, of taking the reader into new lands, or new depths. This is the cost-benefit dilemma that Curtis W. Freeman embraces in *Undomesticated Dissent*, as he presses the tradition of religious dissent in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and beyond), and offers his provocative and passionate reading of several provocative and passionate writers. Freeman's concern is to show the socio-economic implications of religious and spiritual ideas birthed in literary contexts, all under the oppression of the established church, stretching from John Bunyan to Daniel Defoe to William Blake, with tendrils working through colonial America all the way to Martin Luther King Jr.