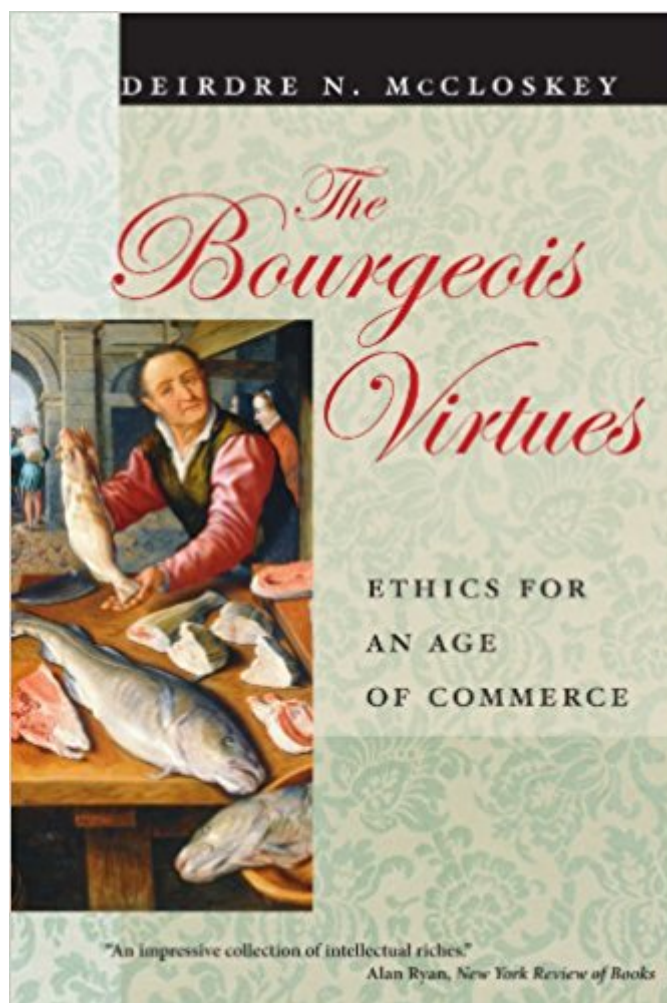


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# The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics For An Age Of Commerce



## 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, Menckens "booboisie" and David Brooks' "bobos" 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 "virtue 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Eschewing the notion that capitalism is evil and the middle class is soft and cowardly, University of Illinois professor McCloskey argues that bourgeois economic practices and people promote the widest possible range of virtues. An economically free and prosperous middle class is not only peaceable, law-abiding and prudent, McCloskey argues, it can also be artistic and spiritual, and support traditional cultures, protect the environment, win wars, make discoveries and care for the unfortunate better than aristocratic or proletarian social organizations. Though her overarching aim is to develop a modern theory and taxonomy of virtues, promoting libertarian economic views and summarizing 250 years of normative economic writings, McCloskey only sketches her argument here; the details will be left to three subsequent volumes. Most of this book is a technical survey of virtues that emphasizes Catholic theology, though it includes material from other traditions. The prose style is arch and obscure, often relying on brief quotations from philosophers, economists and historians and then rebutting them. Without the future volumes, these challenging 600 pages represent a highly idiosyncratic survey with no obvious focus. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"Deirdre McCloskey's unfashionable, contrarian, and compelling manifesto in favor of what she calls the bourgeois virtues starts with an uncompromising 'apology' for how private property, free labor, free trade, and prudent calculation are the font of most ethical good in modern society, not a moral threat to it....She writes with wonderful ease. Her style is conversational and lively, sometimes even cheeky, so that even the toughest concepts seem palatable." - Matt Ridley, Wall Street Journal "An impressive collection of intellectual riches." - Alan Ryan, New York Review of Books"

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 are 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 ....that deals are dirty and unholy, that the dealers are dangerous and disreputable, and that men of honor - such as the gentry or the priests or the mandarins or the SEC or the FDA - should of course keep them in their place. Before Britain and Holland, the world had never seen whole-country examples of success from leaving the bourgeoisie free and respected. People looked to apparently successful Venice and took the lesson that the way to wealth was colonies and mercantilist trade. Those who can see order only when there is a conscious ordering mind - socialists, totalitarians...and the like - feared the consequences of giving dignity and freedom to greedy merchants looking only self-interest. The change in attitude was slow in changing the popular image; in fact, it never did, completely. Nothing different today.

### ECONOMICS IS SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS BETWEEN PEOPLE'S EARS

It was a long and complicated cultural task to change perceptions of the merchant, to create what Schumpeter called a "business-respecting civilization. Before 1600, the transcendent (great) man had been limited to the brave hero or saint, or the courtly, imperious nobleman. Shakespeare, writing around 1600 populated his plays with: honorable aristocrats, comical peasants or sweet peasants. The only bourgeois character is the unsavory Shylock in the "Merchant of Venice." The elite in Britain took a century or more after Shakespeare to just begin thinking of commercial activity as OK.

This book is a very LONG scholarly tome. Yes, it's well-written, language wise, but It's so full of asides and erudite references I gave up on it rather quickly. The author could have made her point about 300 pages earlier. Was she trying to outdo her scholarly competitors?

Good job

Considering you live in a capitalist state, and you are likely a member of the middle class, this is a book that you must read to get a better understanding of how the class you live came to be, and came to have the rules it has. Let alone, how to understand which rules the middle class does indeed have.

Very, very good series(can't wait for #3!) Fills in some missing pieces in our current back and forth political/econ discussions in an intelligent way. Has the potential to change the language/discussion for the better. Paul Heyne recommended this author posthumously. (final lecture on the net)

When I was a freshman undergraduate I had a philosophy professor who seemed to restate his points regularly. I was frustrated until I realized that he was in fact not repeating points but instead delving into slight variations; into the subtle points which made the idea fully flower out. Deirdre McCloskey's *Bourgeois Virtues* is a work of such nature. Memes which bypass the limits of normal linguistic syntax regularly surprise the reader with their incite. The work meticulously draws from multiple disciplines, kaleidoscoping centuries of thought into a cohesive whole which is both metaphysical and deeply personal simultaneously. For the reader who wants to understand our current culture's true values, and your ability to live fully and virtuously within it, this work is for you.

Interesting. Much more detailed than I would want. Discusses the 4 pagan and the 3 Christian virtues-Courage, justice, temperance prudence faith hope and love. Argues for importance of prudence and and considers it a virtue promoted by free markets. Basically argues that the virtues are important for the good and and that the market is not antagonistic to them, Just the opposite. It promotes them

Over written, too wordy.Has some interesting concepts but could have cut out 50 pages at least as there was too much stuffing that slows the reader down.

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