



Eros and the Good: Wisdom According to Nature

James S. Gouinlock

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Plato defined eros as the yearning for things beautiful and good. It is on this original sense that philosopher James Gouinlock bases this insightful study of ethics and wisdom. Gouinlock argues that the only fruitful way to evaluate the norms of social life is to understand them as natural forces, not as arbitrary matters of convention or derivatives of some abstract theory. The good life and the meanings of life consist in the recognition and pursuit of values that are already resident in natural experience. Successful pursuit of them requires teaching, the accumulation of wisdom, and the cultivation of virtue. Above all is eros, the motivating force that drives us to search for life's most precious goods. In so doing we acquire a "wisdom according to nature."

Inspired by Greek philosophy, Gouinlock's approach avoids the pitfalls of moral systems that evolve out of abstract theorizing and tend to ignore well-established practice and conviction. Gouinlock makes the important point that social practices, like natural forces, though subject to change in varying degrees, are rarely amenable to radical overhaul. The real values of common life occur in a difficult, demanding, and often-perilous environment. This is not a context in which anything goes, for it possesses inherent constraints as well as opportunities. As Gouinlock shows in detail, there is much wisdom to be gained from understanding the distinctive functions of nature in the conduct of life.

Written with clarity and eloquence, this original and fully developed philosophy of life makes fundamental philosophical arguments accessible to educated lay readers as well as to professional philosophers.

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