

4 Maccabees, Sirach) bear stronger resemblance. And although Wischmeyer claims that the connection between love of God and neighbour is a New Testament innovation, she also notes the frequent connection of these two ideas in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Another scholar might look at the same material and find greater resemblance between the New Testament and its Jewish cultural surroundings. Furthermore, Wischmeyer reads *agape* as a concept that leaves the law behind. Many scholars would disagree, understanding much of the New Testament, and Paul in particular, as maintaining the law's importance. Love may indeed play a role in how Paul communicates his understanding of the law: by pointing to love as the centre of the law, Paul opens a way for Gentiles who exhibit love to fulfil the law.

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Hud Hudson, *Fallenness and Flourishing*

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Perhaps because we typically connect pessimism with crankiness or despair, self-described pessimists are currently rare. In this book, Hud Hudson defends not a psychological pessimism that, Eeyore-like, expects every event of daily life to turn out unfortunately, but a this-worldly philosophical pessimism, which he considers compatible with eschatological optimism. His resulting 'optimistic pessimism' might sound inconsistent (I prefer the less paradoxical term 'hopeful pessimism') but his argument is thought-provoking.

Hudson begins by highlighting reasons for pessimism, which I group here under four general types. (1) Temporal pessimism raises questions about the Enlightenment belief in historical progress (a theme particularly highlighted by another defender of pessimism, Joshua Dienstag). (2) Anthropological pessimism, arising from the theological doctrines of the fall and original sin, draws attention to the significant and abiding imperfections of humanity. (3) Ontological pessimism highlights a lack of fit between natural human desires and our world – since death and sickness, for example, create widespread unhappiness. (4) Noetic pessimism expresses the concern that in significant ways we do not know what is good for us or how to achieve it, and thus lack the understanding needed to seek happiness.

This-worldly optimism, Hudson suggests, is often vicious because it makes light of these concerns. Like the devils in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who after their fall convinced themselves to try making a heaven out of hell, Americans have developed self-serving habits of 'looking on the bright side'. But are we in fact living good lives, and are we actually happy? Hudson takes up these questions by arguing that human flourishing has two interrelated parts, objective (or ontological) and subjective (or affective). The ontological part he seeks to capture by reference to an 'objective list' theory of the goods essential to the perfection of any human person (e.g. health, knowledge and joy). The affective part is captured by a 'psychic affirmation' theory of happiness,

which refers to the emotional states of endorsement (feeling good about one's life), engagement (the opposite of ennui) and attunement (feeling secure and calm).

Hudson continues his defence of pessimism by contending that we fall short of these standards. In general, we have no idea how good or happy our lives are. This is partly because of the topic's complexity. It is easy to confuse some aspect or simulacrum of happiness for the real thing. Hudson expands on this point by exploring how human beings are likely to be self-deceived or simply distracted from having insight about their own flourishing. Our frenetic pursuit of entertainment and 'success' tends to be anything but relaxing or joyous. Indeed, he says, the seven traditional 'capital vices' can exist without being noticed. He focuses particularly on sloth, the most misunderstood of the lot.

Chapter 4, 'The Masks of Sloth', explores sloth understood not as laziness but as 'an encroaching indifference to genuine goods' (p. 139). The slothful are easily distracted from the distressingly rough and absurd aspects of our existence. Their failure to love and serve genuine goods can take multiple forms. They often abdicate their agential callings by hiding from life in immersive diversions, or by indulging in cynicism and scorn. Sloth may also express itself via obsession over one's own guilt or shame. Those who consider themselves too abhorrent to be loved or redeemed may embrace unhappiness as if it were their good. Extreme forms of sloth, Hudson argues, can even turn violent, partaking of the demonic desire to destroy the good.

What remedy is suitable for such ills? Hudson recommends the virtue of obedience, needed to cooperate with God's reconciling work. He recognises obedience can turn vicious when humans slavishly follow one another. Nevertheless, he contends this theological virtue has four components needed for good lives: *humility*, which disposes us to recognise our limitations; *restraint*, which disposes us to moderate our bad inclinations; *responsiveness*, which disposes us to action; and *love*. Obedience thus understood primes us to seek the goods necessary for flourishing and moves us toward good relationships.

I agree with Hudson that, rightly understood, pessimism serves as an antidote to Norman Vincent Peale-style American optimism. Proper hope is promoted by sombre assessment of our situation. At times, Hudson's expression of these ideas could be more felicitous. His discussion often moves very quickly, for example in the second chapter's brief treatment of hugely complex questions about happiness. His decision to highlight sloth and obedience seemed a bit arbitrary. And though I applaud Hudson's regular use of literary examples, some of his stories were odd or elusive, distracting from his argument.

That said, Hudson's argument is insightful. Optimism about technological or political progress, and the basic decency of humanity, has often served us ill, blinding us to environmental, medical and other realities grimmer than we like to admit. As Hudson argues, the empirical facts are hard to dispute: 'the quantity and quality of disvalue that comes into being regularly outpaces the production of goods' (p. 6). Philosophical pessimism is salutary in calling us to take these concerns seriously.

Some might object that both pessimism and optimism are too broad or dichotomous to be helpful points of view. Hudson implicitly offers two responses. First, although he intends his argument to appeal to non-theists, he rightly argues that those who believe in God cannot simply be pessimists. Thus, he rejects any simple dichotomy. Second, philosophical pessimism is not a sweepingly negative, globalising view that leads to resignation or despair. Rather, it is a mindset that readies us to live with troubles we cannot eradicate, first of all by attending to them.

Echoing this theme, Mara Van der Lugt's *Dark Matters* has defended philosophical pessimism as a virtue that helps us overcome our self-defensive desire to avert our eyes from the grim realities around us and encourages us to attend to the fragility of our lives and do the hard work required to sustain hope. Pessimists, thus understood, are not resigned to evil, but resist it, via an unflinching honesty about the brokenness of creation that helps us seek the good less foolishly.

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J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God*

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J. Richard Middleton's tome is a response to his puzzlement at Abraham's silent response to God asking him to sacrifice his son. So he decided 'to "unbind" the Aqedah from the limitations of traditional readings' (p. 224). With a careful approach to the text of Genesis 22, supported by a reading of the book of Job in a bracing exercise of intertextuality, he argues that both texts, one negatively, the other positively, demonstrate God's approbation of protest and his appreciation of 'a dialogue partner with *chutzpah*' (p. 234).

The book has three parts: part 1 deals with lament psalms and with Moses' challenges of God at Sinai and at Kadesh-Barnea; part 2 considers the book of Job; and part 3 addresses the Aqedah.

With respect to the laments in scripture, Middleton is right: 'These abrasive prayers [Psalms 22, 39, 88] all complain about suffering as intolerable and implore God for deliverance. ... I think we can learn from the honesty of the psalmists' (pp. 34–5). Yes, candid appeals to God are not to be deprecated. But that is not the same as saying protests are always recommended, as Middleton posits: God 'positively desires vigorous dialogue partners' (p. 63). After all, the respective situations of the lament psalms, the Moses stories and the Job accounts are quite different from that in which Abraham found himself. His case alone dealt with an explicit command from deity; the other protagonists merely found themselves in calamitous circumstances, *sans* divine diktat. Abraham's choices would not be Job's (to bless or curse God); his was, 'Obey or don't obey God!'

A tour of the Book of Job makes up part 2. The author supposes that God's approval (in 42:7–8) of Job's speech considers not only the latter's final response in 42:1–6, but his utterances throughout the book: 'Could it be that God answers Job from the whirlwind not to bury him but to praise him?' (pp. 106–7). I'm not so sure about the praiseworthiness of all of Job's responses. In fact, Middleton acknowledges that God was 'correcting Job's theology' in the first divine speech (p. 118). Not everything uttered by the sufferer was necessarily being esteemed: 'Job had impugned God's administration