# Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues

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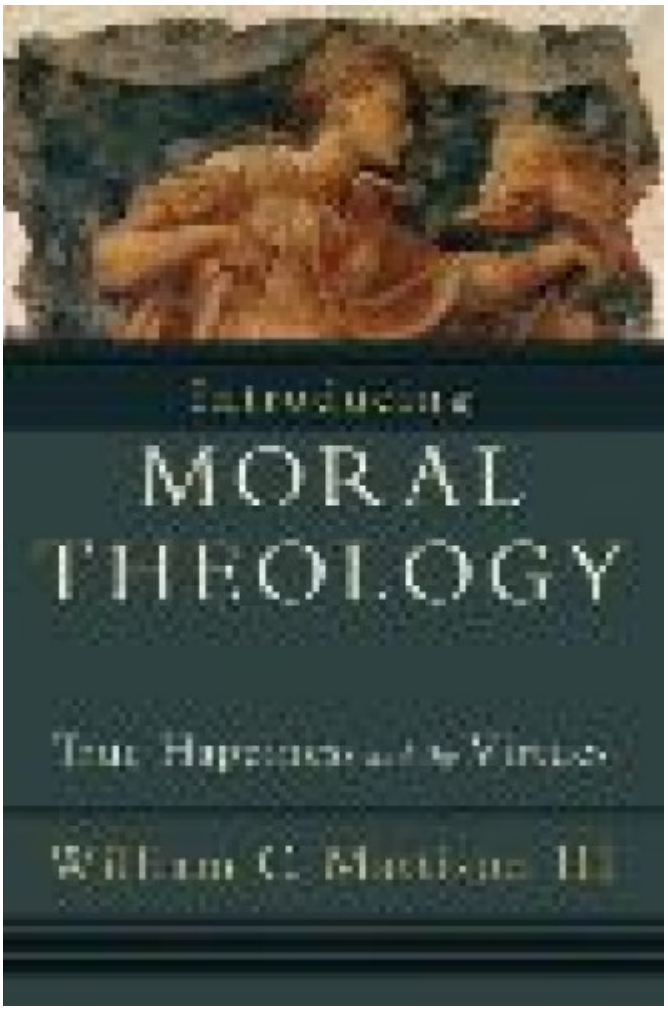
## In Review




### Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues

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What counts as the good life? What constitutes happiness? What do we really need in order to flourish as human beings? Many of us would associate these questions with the late-night conversations we love to have with friends or the subjects we explore together on long afternoon walks. But we might not expect to find them at the heart of the study of ethics.

Should an education in happiness be the principal goal in the study of ethics? In a rich and challenging book, William Mattison argues that it should. Following in the tradition of Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas (and more recently the Dominican theologians Servais Pinc kaers and Herbert McCabe), he sets out to explore why a morally good life is a happy life.

The danger of parsing Christian morality solely through the language of laws, rules, principles and obligations, Mattison suggests, is that it leads us to think of morality as something external with which we must uncomfortably align our lives. But a proper understanding of the moral life should convince us that morality and happiness are inextricably linked because human beings are perfected in goodness, specifically the exquisitely beautiful goodness that is God. Thus, far from being alien or oppressive, morality ought to help us achieve the most genuine fulfillment of our nature as children of God called to friendship with God. And this will happen, Mattison argues, in the same measure as that in which we acquire and grow in the virtues.

Over the last 30 years Christian ethicists have given increasing attention to the virtues, a treasure of the Christian heritage that had too long been neglected. But no one has integrated the virtues with the other fundamental dimensions of Christian ethics as completely and successfully as Mattison does in *Introducing Moral Theology*. Centering Christian ethics in the virtues is eminently promising not only because through the virtues we acquire the habits and skills necessary for life, but also because the virtues shape us into persons who can do what is right and good regularly and insightfully.

An assistant professor of theology at the Catholic University of America, Mattison excels in demonstrating the relevance of the virtues for the most practical aspects of our lives. For example, in a chapter geared to college students but pertinent for any reader, he deftly illustrates how without the virtue of temperance our habits regarding alcohol can become dangerously destructive. Sim ilarly, he indicates how

without chastity, a virtue born from temperance, we can do tremendous harm to others because we will not have learned how to order our sexual desires in a way that both respects others and treats them justly.

But there are virtues that can be acquired by any human being, and there are virtues that have traditionally been viewed as distinguishing features of the Christian life. With this in mind, Mattison structures the first half of his book around the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. He offers a thoughtful and extensive analysis of the meaning and importance of each of these virtues but does not suggest a specifically Christian understanding of them because one does not need to be Christian in order to be prudent, just, temperate or courageous.

But this does not imply that our religious beliefs and commitments make no difference in our moral lives. A central contention of the book is that happiness requires a truthful understanding of ourselves and our world. Thus, in a pivotal transitional chapter Mattison argues that Christian ethics must consistently be informed by what Christians believe about God, themselves and the world. Calling these big-picture beliefs, he contends that the Christian account of creation, sin and redemption provides the framework for the moral life because it underscores how, despite our frailty and sinfulness, we are called to find happiness with God through self-giving love for others.

Mattison then explores the moral implications of these big-picture beliefs through a detailed study of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Unlike the cardinal virtues that direct us in our lives together in the world, the theological virtues orient us to God, in whom our most complete happiness is found. And unlike the cardinal virtues, which we can acquire on our own, the theological virtues are gifts of grace that must be infused into us by God.

As soon as we shift to the big-picture beliefs of Christianity and to the theological virtues, our account of ethics must correspondingly change. Because of what Christians ultimately believe, hope for and are called to love, their understanding of what is truly prudent and just, temperate and courageous will differ from other accounts of these virtues. For instance, the paradigm for Christian accounts of courage is not the warrior in battle, but the martyr. Similarly, in the Christian life prudence aims not only at wise and astute action in this world, but also at achievement of the ultimate goal of communion with God and the saints in the reign

of God.

This book has several strengths. First, Mattison intersperses its more theoretical portions with chapters that focus on particular test cases such as the morality of war, euthanasia and sex outside of marriage. Doing this allows him not only to guide the reader through a variety of arguments on each of these issues, but also to illustrate the relevance of the virtues for helping us think rightly about each case. Too often studies of the virtues focus on their role in the formation of one's character but neglect to show how they can also be applied to complex moral dilemmas.

Second, echoing feminist theologians and other proponents of virtue ethics, Mattison recognizes that no account of the moral life that is centered on happiness can overlook the role of passions, emotions and desires. He shows how these must be integrated into the virtues and how, when rightly ordered, they facilitate and enrich the moral life.

Finally, while Mattison certainly does not argue that one needs to be Christian in order to be virtuous, he does contend that what Christians believe ought to make a substantive difference in how they love, in how they suffer and, most pointedly, in what they think will bring them happiness. In this respect, Christian ethics is not like other approaches to the moral life.

*Introducing Moral Theology* is an impressive and important achievement. Written predominantly from the Catholic moral tradition, it reaches beyond that tradition by showing how the Christian moral life, as an ongoing initiation into authentic happiness, is inseparable from a life of discipleship.