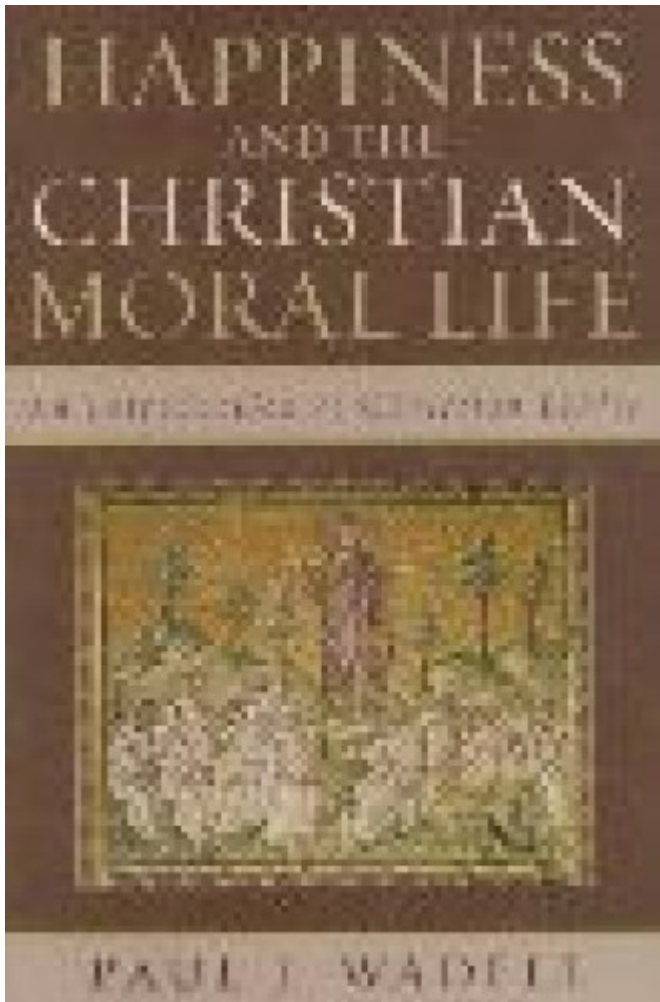


Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics

reviewed by [Ellen T. Charry](#) in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics

Paul J. Wadell

This is a book that I believe is right, true and helpful. Paul Wadell argues that happiness lies in the cultivation of the moral life. His is an exercise in virtue ethics that integrates classic, Christian and modern democratic virtues into a pattern and urges readers to develop the skills that make for a successful and rewarding life. Wadell suggests that the Christian moral life—is the Christian life any other?—is a lifelong process of discerningly applying the basic skill of loving the good and doing it. His thesis is that becoming good, or at least better at loving the good, enables successful living. Happiness lies in training ourselves in a way of life that enables us to reach our grandest possibilities in goodness.

The argument builds from the doctrine of creation. Wadell's is a strength-based theology that assumes that God intends for us to be happy and that it is within our power to be so when we freely choose life with God—a life guided by the biblical narrative and the life and teachings of Jesus, most clearly presented in the Sermon on the Mount. Care for self and others is the essence of a good life. Sin—a debilitating misuse of love—harms self and others and makes everyone miserable. But God promises and enables good for us, and if we are wise enough to find trustworthy mentors, harness ourselves to a community with a strong moral memory and practices that form us for goodness, and open ourselves to fraternal correction, we can learn the strengths and skills needed for a good life.

With a lifetime of practice, loving the good and doing it will become habitual and ever more psychologically satisfying, and a happy life will become more solidified and ever more deeply grounded in who we have become over time.

Wadell writes not for the academy, but for people in the pews and for those who ought to fill them. Inspired by the Aristotelian-Thomistic outlook on the good life and enriched by recent reflection on virtue ethics in Christian perspective, the book is readily accessible, never pedantic or obscure. Wadell has a way with words, and his book is down-to-earth, honest and hopeful, filled with straightforward recognition of why we avoid the goodness that makes for a happy life and what it takes to overcome that avoidance.

Christianity and its theology do not, in Wadell's view, provide a Procrustean ideology into which we must squeeze our complex and sometimes contradictory lives in order to report ourselves faithful and obedient. Nor does virtue ethics offer a clear-cut set

of rules for decision making in the face of moral quandary. Rather, magnanimity of spirit, prudence, courage, chastity and especially love, harnessed to a wise understanding of freedom and a passionate commitment to justice, yield the life we truly wish for ourselves when we stop to think about it. Temperance is oddly missing from Wadell's argument.

Wadell is well aware that many people seem not to desire such a Christian moral life for themselves and seem committed to evil paths instead. He is also keenly aware that to practice such a life, one must see it exemplified in family life, in the work of fine teachers, in the stories of great personages and, above all, in the story of God's life with us in Jesus Christ. Many people lack access to positive models around which to form themselves, but, Wadell points out, since each one is made in the image of God, coming to desire goodness and growing into it is always a possibility that beckons. Our task is always to help one another grow into as much goodness as is possible for each of us.

Wadell is not naive about the challenge posed by the Christian moral life. Near the outset he dispenses with the equation of happiness with pleasure in order to assure readers that consumerism is a false path to the goal. Still, he notes that there is a pleasure, a deep-seated satisfaction with self, in living the good life. Even Kant, for all his vaunted opposition to virtue ethics, acknowledged as much. Wadell offers his disclaimer so that he can go on to argue that a life of goodness is stronger than the suffering that comes to everyone in one form or another. The shipwrecks of life may be unavoidable, but they cannot harm the happiness that a good moral life yields because love is stronger than death.

Some readers will not be pleased with such a positive and practical approach to the Christian life. Those expecting a defect-based theology that exalts sin as impossible to overcome and denigrates growth in goodness as dangerously undermining of humility will be disappointed by the can-do attitude of this very patristic and Catholic offering. Wadell urges the imitation of God and Christ, not attention to divine wrath mitigated by absolution of sin worked on the cross. There is a vast difference in orientation between these two streams of Christian thought.

Prudence, or practical wisdom—*phronesis* in Greek—is central to Wadell's argument. Prudence is crucial to the sort of self-knowledge that enables good judgment in every situation. Kant suspected that prudence is merely disguised self-interest and did not consider it fitting for the moral life. Although Wadell does not engage Kant on

this point, he contends that to emphasize the self-interested dimension of prudence is to skew it badly, for practical wisdom is needed as much for caring for the poor as for caring for self. A virtuous life is complex, and prudent discernment is always required for deciding a course of action, whether it be targeted at one's own well-being or that of others.

The book concludes with a plea for Christians to adopt a communitarian rather than an individualistic outlook on self and society so they can better care for the poor. This argument, by now commonplace in Christian reflection, does not come off well here for two reasons. First, Wadell fails to note that individualism is a bad idea not simply because it is selfish. It is a false and impossible notion in and of itself. Individualism is not a sin; it is a delusion.

Second, a general plea on behalf of the poor does not go very far unless the complex causes of poverty and the other factors that attend it are understood. The public policies, governmental structures, social institutions, ecological factors and political climate that shape social realities are beyond the ability of even well-meaning executive-class individuals to influence very much. Churches can run food and shelter ministries and after-school tutoring programs and such, but it is naive to suppose that such efforts will achieve grand results. Alleviating the suffering of the dispossessed seems to be beyond the scope of the virtuous life.