

Assuming Responsibility: Ecstatic Eudaimonism and the Call to Live Well. By Jennifer A. Herdt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 288 pages. \$105.00.

In a well-known passage of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that “if *eudaemonism* (the principle of happiness) is set up as the basic principle instead of *eleutheronomy* (the principle of the freedom of internal lawgiving), the result is the *euthanasia* (easy death) of all morals.” Although whether Kant understood what the Greek philosophers meant by *eudaimonia* is doubtful, his suspicion of eudaimonistic ethical theories has nevertheless haunted modern moral thought, leading many contemporary ethicists to focus their attention on questions of duty and obligation, often to the detriment of reflection on happiness and the virtues. In *Assuming Responsibility: Ecstatic Eudaimonism and the Call to Live Well*, Jennifer Herdt confronts Kant’s critique of eudaimonism head-on, arguing that aretaic (virtue-based) and deontic (obligation-based) ethical perspectives are not in fact incompatible, but rather inseparable and complementary aspects of the moral life.

The book specifically aims to address two interrelated concerns regarding the viability of eudaimonism, both of which find expression in Kant’s critique. On the one hand, Herdt wishes to combat the idea that eudaimonism is objectionably self-regarding, insofar as it assumes that all moral action is ultimately motivated by concern for one’s own happiness or welfare. On the other hand, she seeks to explain how eudaimonism can accommodate genuine respect for others without distorting the essential character of obligation. While she acknowledges the failure of certain “welfare-prior” forms of eudaimonism to adequately address these concerns, she argues that the “goodness-prior” or “ecstatic” eudaimonism of theologians like Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin offers an alternative approach able to successfully integrate both deontic and aretaic ethical perspectives.

The book begins with a substantive introduction (Chapter 1), followed by two interpretive chapters (Chapters 2–3) that seek to uncover the ecstatic character of classical Christian eudaimonism, for which the question “How should I live?” is inseparable from that of “What is the highest good?” Herdt then turns in Chapter 4 to explaining how ecstatic or goodness-prior eudaimonism can avoid the charge of egoism that threatens welfare-prior accounts. Central to her argument is the claim that “moral agency is directed primarily toward goodness as such, rather than toward goodness *for* the agent” (102). Accordingly, Herdt argues, it is not the case that a moral agent’s “concern for others, or for the various particular goods they pursue, is *conditional* on these concerns being good *for them*. Rather, their welfare *supervenes* on proper responsiveness to the good *as such*” (90).

In the second half of the book, Herdt draws upon a breadth of theological and philosophical sources to develop a nuanced account of moral obligation that can preserve its special stringency while remaining within a eudaimonistic framework. In Chapters 5 and 6, her primary aim is to distinguish her “deflationary” account of obligation from those developed in recent years by divine command theorists such as Robert Adams and John Hare (129). In contrast with these approaches, Herdt rejects the notion of a *sui generis* category of moral obligation that requires special theological justification, and instead conceives of it more generally as a deontic status arising from communal practices of reason-giving (168). Finally, in Chapters 7 and 8, Herdt considers how much of the substance of our obligations can be deduced from this account and concludes with a moving reflection on the fundamental task of moral agency as that of rejoicing in the good.

There is much to recommend in this deeply insightful and carefully argued book, which draws extensively upon recent work in moral philosophy to advance an original and compelling thesis. I was particularly impressed by Herdt’s ability to sort through difficult philosophical debates in a way that demonstrates their relevance for current work in moral theology. Although the philosophical idiom with which Herdt articulates her view will perhaps be unfamiliar to some readers of this journal, any moral theologian interested in the relation between happiness, virtue, and obligation would benefit from engaging this exemplary work of theological ethics.

Catholic moral theologians especially will be interested in scrutinizing Herdt’s claim that her approach “is compatible with Thomistic accounts that focus on the virtue of justice” (6). Herdt brilliantly draws out aspects of Aquinas’s moral theology that align with her goodness-prior account, and persuasively argues that his approach cannot be reduced to a crude form of welfare-prior eudaimonism. However, I was ultimately left wondering if these categories adequately capture what is distinctive about Aquinas’s account of moral agency, which focuses not primarily on what is good *for the agent*, nor what is good *as such*, but rather what constitutes good or bad *human action*. That is to say, perhaps Aquinas’s eudaimonism might be better understood by paying closer attention to how he understands the nature of human action which, though necessarily ordered towards one’s own perfection as moral agent, can nevertheless be motivated by the appreciation of goods as valuable in themselves, independent of their relation to one’s own individual welfare.

Of course, regardless of whether Herdt’s account is wholly compatible with Aquinas’s perspective, she has provided a richly textured

account of the moral life moral theologians of the Thomistic persuasion and otherwise would do well to take up and read.

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Disability Ethics and Preferential Justice: A Catholic Perspective. By Mary Jo Iozzio. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023. xii + 122 pages. \$32.95.

There was once a time when any theological engagement with the subject of disability began with a sense of anxiety and careful deliberation as authors worked to justify the subject's place in the field. Thankfully, these prologues have become increasingly unnecessary in part because of scholars like Mary Jo Iozzio who, over the course of her career, has consistently paired serious theological rigor and depth with a complex contextual approach to lived experience. Her newest book, *Disability Ethics and Preferential Justice*, provides a useful introduction to the subject and demonstrates powerful ways Catholic social teaching motivates a broader sense of inclusion for those with disabilities. While the book concludes by interrogating friendship, a ubiquitous topic in the field, the first four chapters are primarily concerned with the systems of control that shape the daily lives of people with disabilities. Through incisive engagement with sources from the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and official church teachings, Iozzio has produced an accessible guide that takes a holistic look at the realities of advocacy and accompaniment.

Iozzio divides her book into five concise chapters, each of which opens with an epigraph from other Catholic scholars who live and work in close proximity to disability. Chapter One provides a general overview of the subject of disability, while giving context for categories of disability and examining how it is treated through social, medical, and religious models. By tracing the historical locations and cultural perceptions of disability, Iozzio provides an account of how social stigmas against disability have been solidified institutionally over time. One key argument in this chapter is that the marginalization that comes as a result of stigma tends to rob communities of the life-giving diversity that disability provides.

The second chapter reviews contributions made by the World Health Organization and the United Nations and provides an account of the accommodations made for people with disabilities across the globe. These sources work to communicate the difficult reality that people with disabilities remain among the least advantaged of anyone in the world, disproportionately ranking among the world's most impoverished (29). Iozzio uses lessons gleaned from secular sources