

**Hud Hudson. *Fallenness and Flourishing*. Oxford
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I have not read all the books published in the *Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology* series, but I have read many of them. Hudson's *Fallenness and Flourishing* is a recent offering from this series and, compared to those in this series that I have read, it is unique in a host of ways. The most unique, though, is that it is *spiritually* edifying and challenging. Now, I am not entirely sure whether an academic theology text should be spiritually edifying/challenging nor whether describing it thusly counts as a compliment or a criticism. I *mean* it as a compliment. Hudson's writing, thought experiments, and explanations of the human predicament and the prescribed remedy—viz., obedience to God—are captivating. They are challenging in that they operate as a mirror that exposes warts and wrinkles.¹ Perhaps another word to describe what I mean is: *convicting*. *Fallenness and Flourishing* is not dry, academic prose. Instead, it is an engaging work of diagnosis and prescription, one which resonates deep in my affections. To my mind, this book will repay careful re-reading and further study. As a work in Christian theology, I think the Christian reader will find spiritual benefit as well as academic fodder.

The argument that Hudson presents is simple. And, for a pessimist like me, it is an argument that initially is compelling (I say “initially” for reasons I will spell out at the end of the review). Philosophical pessimism is true: the present condition of the created order—taken as a whole—is (at least) *bellicious* (if not Hell) (ix). Moreover, in the attempt to pursue happiness, humans all too often attempt to make “a Heaven of the Hell that...is our current abode” by our own efforts, leaning on our creativity, intelligence, and the like (ix). This leads only to disaster, Hudson argues, because flourishing in this fallen world depends *not* in leaning on our own abilities and powers. For, since The Fall, humans are frail, broken, and not equipped properly to do the sort of things for which they are designed, viz., to love God and neighbor. So, humans find themselves in a dire situation. They cannot flourish on their own. Fortunately, given the Christian account of things, there's a remedy. Hudson argues that what humans *must* do, if they wish to flourish, is to cultivate the virtue of obedience (viii). That is, humans must learn to cultivate a virtue that works toward uniting one's will with God's (xi). Obedience of this sort serves as the “priming condition” that allows the other “welfare goods” (goods that produce human flourishing) to have their intended effects (xi). The idea is this: like paint applied to an unprimed surface, welfare goods fail to have their intended effects on humans when those humans are not primed—that is, when they are not virtuously obedient (169-177). A necessary precondition for flourishing—for taking advantage of goods that help humans to be flourishing humans—is the virtue of obedience. Genuine human flourishing, then, begins with obedience to God.

¹ I'd love to give this a cleaner analytic definition. But the best I have is this metaphor.

For space, I'll highlight five aspects of this book. Two of them are arguments I find compelling, two of them are problems from which the text suffers (so I say), and one is an argument that, while initially compelling, fails to be grounded properly in Christian theology. Let us start with the two highlighted positives: Hudson's diagnosis of sloth and his prescription of the virtue of obedience.

On sloth: as I understand it, a typical take on this sin is that it is one of laziness, a lack of desire to *do* much of anything. But Hudson makes a compelling argument that suggests that sloth is much more than laziness, even if that is a fruit of sloth. Instead, sloth is "a deadening and dangerous impoverishment of mind—a depression and a sadness which can overwhelm, compress, or even extinguish the normal range of one's emotional responses to life...is the sin which carves out joy, leaving in its place a hollow and vacant indifference...and which gradually robs its victim of the capacity to fight her way back into happiness" (114). The insight, following Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung's work, brings to bear that sloth is a kind of "sin of sadness" (112) that cultivates both an indifference and a resistance to "the demands of love" (114). If humans are designed to fulfill the demands of love—both to God and neighbor—and this is part and parcel of human flourishing, then sloth acts as a sickness that dehumanizes and kills its human hosts.

On this more expanded way of thinking about sloth, it can look like laziness *or* hyperactively flitting between distractions. It can look like failing to want to work or wanting to work *too* much. Sloth can wear many masks, argues Hudson. Chapter 4 is especially insightful, acting as a diagnostic for sloth in its many guises. Hudson concludes:

One can race from boredom to mindless diversions, or convince oneself that the world is...absurd, or anguish over whether life is worth living at all, or give oneself entirely over to evil, or abdicate one's agency and be ruled by chance, or frantically pursue the diminishing pleasures of sensual novelty, or attempt to explain one's misfortune by appeal to some invented offensive or indifferent feature of God's or despair over a perceived spiritual deformity in oneself rooted in guilt or shame (157).

By Hudson's lights, sloth, though masquerading as various ways to pursue happiness in a hellish world, acts only to sink a human further and further into unhappiness. And, like love—the virtue of charity, in this context—Hudson notes that sloth is not a mere feeling. It, like charity, involves the will. Thus Hudson: "Sloth is...a willfully indulged aversion to participating in and cultivating the goods of love" (116). *This* analysis of sloth is challenging, particularly for those of us that have numerous hobbies and that devote much of our time to our academic pursuits. The question implied by Hudson's analysis is this: for what reason are we pursuing these goods? Are they to help grow virtues for flourishing? Or (given our fallen condition, more likely the case) are they distractions from attending to how the demands of love require us to interact with our world, the people in it, and God? If happiness is flourishing, sloth is unhappiness—a failing to flourish (116).

I confess to being not an expert on the literature on sloth. But there's much in Hudson's diagnosis that "rings true." And, if one grants Hudson's account of happiness (psychic affirmation) and unhappiness (psychic renunciation), which he stakes out in Chapter 2, it's hard to disagree with his thesis that sloth and unhappiness are so similar as to be identical (116). At any rate, I'm not in a position to adjudicate on the matter. What I can say is this: his analysis of sloth as a vice—perhaps the chief vice—that extinguishes the desire rightly to love seems to me an accurate description of the human condition *and* sets up his prescribed remedy: the virtue of obedience.

While resisting to settle on which theory of virtues is correct, Hudson supposes that obedience might be thought a virtue on any of the three theories he canvasses (e.g., a certain sort of character trait that systematically produces more good than not, a certain sort of character trait that directly promotes the flourishing of its subject, or “an abiding pro-attitude, held for the right reasons, in favor of a particular good”) (161-162). Or, it might be thought of as a theological virtue because “it is directly concerned with God and engages the will in a distinctive manner” (162). Whatever the case, obedience, for Hudson, “is a combination of an abiding and deeply seated pro-attitude towards uniting one’s will with God’s will and a robust and stable set of dispositions aimed at combatting” our sinful desire to pursue our own desires and independence “even to the contempt of God and to the (earthly) ruin of...fellow creatures” (162-163).

On this account, obedience involves several dispositions of the will: to be aware of and guard against excessive self-love; to resist making idols of lesser goods; to commit to God’s revealed word; to persevere in the hope that God will make good on his word; and to act in accordance with that hope through loving God and neighbor (163). Thinking about this conception for even a moment exposes how complicated it is. And Hudson agrees. In fact, he says, “it’s even messier than it looks” (163). For it includes, in addition to these dispositions, four distinct components which are degreed and admit of vagueness (163): humility, restraint, response, and love. His definition of “obedience” is this: a complex set of dispositions and attitudes whose four components are humility, restraint, response, and love.

Here’s why this analysis is a highlight of the book. He makes a compelling argument that obedience is a virtue—in fact, that it may be a theological virtue (he does admit to thinking that a secular obedience seems unlikely (183)). On a Christian story, this seems true. Obedience to God—obedience in the truest sense—is either divinely monergistic (God alone doing the work) or else synergistic between God and man (i.e., Pelagius was wrong). Moreover, obedience as a priming condition for welfare goods to take their true effect delivers this important theological upshot: flourishing without obedience to God is impossible. Hudson’s language isn’t nearly that strong; but I think it could have been. Like paint that easily would flake off of an unprimed plastic model, so too would the effects of welfare goods flake off of unprimed human beings. Hudson suggests that the consequences of unprimed conditions would be something like a “dulling” of the effects that welfare goods ought to have on human beings. That’s right, it seems to me; but perhaps it’s starker than that (see: flaking off). However one wants to spell out the metaphor, Hudson’s proposed remedy resolves the problems he canvasses earlier in the book. Humans grasp at things that they think will help them flourish, many of which are goods. The problem is, they are wrongly pursued. Why? Because they first need to be primed with obedience. Without obedience, the goods that humans pursue will serve only to make humans unhappy (that is: fail to help humans flourish). This chapter, too, is convicting. It impresses on the Christian reader to take seriously whether one is being obedient to God.

Finally, two complaints. The first is more minor. Much of this work is devoted to a theological teasing out of various lines from John Milton’s poem *Paradise Lost*. But we’re not given anything like an argument for why one should mine a poem (that isn’t divinely inspired, at any rate) for theological data points, data points which are used to build a conception of the human condition and its remedy. I might be rather barbarian for thinking this, but it strikes me as unfitting of this sort of medium (that is, poetry). It’s not that art cannot communicate truth. I think it can and does, often in ways that flat analytic prose cannot. But pulling theological data points from a fictional poem, for the purposes of theory building, seems to me as methodologically strange as would doing the same thing with a painting. I’d rather have

had the theory building begin from Scripture (and/or Tradition), further fleshed out by theological treatise and conceptual analysis, and *then* perhaps illumined by way of poetry. Hudson begins with poetry; for theology, that seems the wrong place to begin.

This minor complaint leads to a more significant gripe. There's almost no biblical exegesis in this book. Hudson's not an exegete; neither am I. There's no fault in that; no one should expect Hudson to be an expert in all theologically related areas of study. But doing theology of this sort—theology attempting to analyze the human condition and provide a Christian accounting for its remedy—needs divine insight. For Christians, this starts with Scripture. For the non-exegete, this means appealing to and referencing secondary sources, viz., those from our academic sisters and brothers in the world of biblical studies. Theology, analytic or not, needs more scriptural interaction, not less. And there's almost none in this book. The one main place in which the Scriptures are quoted and used to support an argument is in Chapter 5 (a chapter that I think, on the whole, is excellent). In it, Hudson makes use of a particular reading of the temptations of Christ. But he offers no academically informed reading of that text (see 165-167). Instead, as best I can tell, he offers a reading that one finds in another of Milton's works, *Paradise Regained*.² Hudson makes much of Christ's resistance to the devil while being on "the pinnacle of the temple" as though what is facing Christ is a position in which he cannot, of his own power, continue to stand (as if he's standing on a very sharp point). But it's not clear at all that this is what the biblical author is trying to say, and there is much disagreement about to what "the pinnacle of the temple" refers (as it happens, the roof of that temple was flat). Given that this is an academic book, we're owed some well-supported reasons for thinking that Hudson's reading of this text is correct. Or, at the very least, give the reader a conditional stipulation: "suppose that Milton's particular reading of this story is correct..." Doing so avoids raising the hackles of those of us who desire for our analytic theology colleagues to give deference to our colleagues in biblical studies (and thus does not distract from what is a wonderful chapter).

Finally, my main concern. The book's first chapter is a defense of philosophical pessimism. Philosophical pessimism "offers...dismal predictions about what nearly all of us can expect to experience...about the welfare of our fellow creatures, about the character of our social institutions and global politics, and about our progress in these matters in the future" (2). It builds a strong philosophical case that the world is, taken as a whole, hellish and bleak. If not for the promise of new creation, perhaps one could even call it "grimdark." Hudson calls it "Bleak AF" (21). As I mention above, I'm a pessimist too; so my sympathies are with his argument. But here's the mistake that I think Hudson makes. I think pessimism (both my general view of the world and the philosophical position) are out of step with the Christian doctrine of creation. They're also out of step with a biblical theology of the current state of things, a state that finds it to be the case that the rule and reign of the cosmos has—post his resurrection—been granted to Messiah Jesus. I dare say that Jesus's being Lord of the cosmos rules out at once its being Hell or hellish. As a creation of the almighty and perfectly wise and good God, the cosmos is good. Is it broken? Not entirely. Is it healing? If the biblical theologians are correct, yes. The new creation began in the resurrection of Jesus. The creation groans in hopeful anticipation. God's good world will be made right. *This* creation will be united with Heaven in the eschaton.

² John Milton (1670), *Paradise Regained: A Poem* (London: J. M.), Book IV, 545-570 (available at https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/pr/title/text.shtml); W. A. McClung, "The Pinnacle of the Temple," *Milton Quarterly* 15:1 (1981): 13-16.

Now, I agree with Hudson that “a world of our own devising is a world of suffering and a world of horrors” (26). The problem is that, if the Christian story is true, there is no such world. The creation is shot through with grace, and we with it. We do not live in a Hobbesian state of nature; and, I’d argue, it’s not possible that we ever could. Nature denuded of God’s sustaining power and grace—nature’s going utterly to pot—is, on the Christian story, a metaphysical impossibility. Moreover, Hudson warns us (rightly, in my view) that one shouldn’t make a Heaven of Hell. But if this world is Hell (or hellish), as Hudson suggests, then making a Heaven of Hell is what the eschaton is. As I say, I think Hudson is correct. But that implies (via *modus tollens*) that this world *isn’t* Hell (or hellish). We pessimists are just mistaken. And if we aren’t, we need (for an academic theology book) some reckoning with the biblical witness, conjoined with the philosophical case, to make the argument theologically palatable. But this is absent.

My worries aside, this book is wonderful. There’s much more to be said than I have had space to say. The book is erudite, irenic, constructive, convicting, engaging, clear, well-written, and a joy to read. As I mention in the opening, this will repay re-reading. *Fallenness and Flourishing* is a sterling piece of analytic theology, one which does the remarkable: spiritually edifies and challenges (at least) the Christian reader.