[Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers](https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy)

Volume 39 | Issue 2 Article 7

4-1-2022

Hud Hudson, FALLENNESS AND FLOURISHING

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Recommended Citation
DeYoung, Rebecca K. (2022) "Hud Hudson, FALLENNESS AND FLOURISHING," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 7.
DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.2.7
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss2/7

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fallenness and Flourishing, by Hud Hudson. Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. vii + 213. $85.00 (hardcover)

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If one were to demand tangible evidence of what sort of goods would be lost if current pressures on higher education push the humanities and liberal arts to the margins (and perhaps over the cliff edge entirely), this book could serve as Exhibit A. Hudson's book reads like a seminar on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* cross-listed with a course in analytic philosophy of religion, with recommended pre-requisites in ethics, Augustinian theology, and a bit of epistemology. The book's often wry and witty prose is dotted with parable-like stories, along with references to literary figures from Sisyphus to Hamlet and Ivan Karamazov. It takes a mind well-studied in the liberal arts, years of contemplative integration of ideas, and plenty of teaching experience to produce (and perhaps also appreciate) such a book. It reads like a comprehensive overview of a lifetime's work in philosophy, not only as an academic discipline or skill set, but as a wise reflection on how best to live one's life—and how not to.

Hudson's book is one of the most recent installments in the Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology series, edited by Michael Rea and Oliver Crisp. It joins an already stellar set of contributions which cover studies of doctrine (atonement, Christology) and moral theory (humility, love), among other topics and collections of essays. Even those not invested in the philosophy of religion as a sub-discipline will find worthwhile reading here, and Hudson's contribution only adds further luster to the list.

The book's overall argument begins from an unvarnished assessment of evil (natural and moral, suffering and sin) and draws a pessimistic conclusion: the human race hasn't been doing very well, and our situation isn't likely to improve with more earnest effort. The best diagnosis of our predicament is that we have followed the path suggested by Mammon in Milton's masterpiece: to seek happiness our own way—apart from God's way—and by our own power. Such a path leaves our lives disordered, dissatisfying, and self-frustrating. It is also delusory and self-deceptive, and one of the signature strengths of the book is its analysis of these and other

pp.313–317 FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY Vol. 39 No. 2 April 2022
doi: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.2.7
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noetic effects of sin. Hudson's logic (following the Augustinian tradition) shows that it takes not only perversity of will but also blindness to devote one's life to the doomed project of "making a Heaven out of Hell" (47). After a broad survey of accounts of happiness and wellbeing, and a colorful account of their opposites—various forms of unhappiness brought on by various vices, including an extended discussion of the masks worn by the vice of sloth—Hudson concludes that the only way out is to exchange Mammon's advice for its opposite, the virtue of obedience. Our posture toward God must move from resistance to cooperation, relinquishing Mammon's restriction that we pursue happiness on our own terms. Obedience is, essentially, consent to follow God's will, the only path to human flourishing. Such obedient submission is the "proper priming" condition (172), so Hudson argues, that enables the rest of the virtues to shine fully in a good and happy life. That such obedience has been made possible (again) by the atonement is grounds, in the end, for hope.

Chapter 1, "Some False Step," describes our predicament which, Hudson argues, can be made convincingly from a non-religious vantage point. Acknowledging the extent of suffering and evil most reasonably yields a "philosophy of pessimism" (1, 43, *inter alia*). It's not just that we are in a world "out of balance"; we are also (often) deceived about our own motives and therefore our part in contributing to such a world. We can draw that same conclusion from a naturalistic starting point, as well as from the perspective of different world religions (11–18). Christianity's doctrines of the fall and atonement offer a good explanation of the mess we are in and reasons for optimism. When trying to puzzle through the reasons why God's intervention in the atonement might permit or warrant sin and suffering of this magnitude *en route* to salvation, however, we are rather dramatically confronted by the limits of human reason (our ignorance of God's reasons). Hope is a rational response, therefore, but not confidence (42).

Chapter 2, "Thus Mammon Spake," focuses on Mammon's advice to "make a Heaven of Hell, pursue happiness and achieve well-being." This advice comes with a crucial "restriction": "be sure to do so on your own terms, by way of your own resources, without capitulating to God" (47–48, 53, 57, 72, 80). Hudson begins with a robust warning that regarding what is truly good for us, human cognitive powers are liable to ignorance and incomprehension, failures of recognition, self-deception, and denial. With that humble skepticism in our back pocket, Hudson then canvasses theories of well-being, both subjective and objective (hedonism, desire-fulfillment, perfectionism, and objective list), finally defending an objective list theory that applies to human *persons*—a more appropriate kind-category than human being (65)—against charges of arbitrariness (to wit: it fares no worse than its competitors) and alienation (expected given moral transformation over time and also given the disorder of the relevant human powers) (e.g., 77). Turning to happiness, he argues in favor of a "psychic affirmation" theory with three components: "endorsement,

engagement, and attunement" (79–80). Later, he will contrast these three components with their opposites to generate a definition of unhappiness which accurately matches the effects of slothful turning away from God.

Chapter 3, "Libido Sentiendi, Libido Sciendi, Libido Dominandi," is a tour de force of the noetic effects of sin. Hudson argues that in addition to disordered self-love (either its excessive or deficient forms), the fallen human condition leaves us liable to duplicity and self-deception, with a strong aversion to truth (99). We are experts at remaining in denial about our own unhappiness and its causes, through what Pascal famously described as "diversions" (99). Hudson illustrates the self-deceptive element of the human predicament through a series of vignettes of characters caught up in the seven deadly sins (106–112). Notably, he then singles out the vice of sloth for extended treatment, which continues throughout the next chapter. Sloth constitutes the stance and subsequent predicament of those who follow Mammon's advice and restriction. Hudson casts sloth as the picture of unhappiness or "psychic renunciation," which includes dejection, disengagement, and discordance—the mirror opposite of psychic affirmation (102, 116). In contrast to a prideful excess of desire or ambition, sloth represents a different kind of problem: love for God has been "extinguished" and needs to be reignited (117). Targeting sloth hones Hudson's pessimistic assessment of human misery and its theological diagnosis. Although he draws on accounts of sloth from recent literature, this framework is the book's most original contribution. It also sets the stage for Hudson's specific recommendations in the final chapter.

Chapter 4, "The Masks of Sloth," gives us an extended psychological profile of those who succumb to sloth. Given the argument so far, this diagnosis seems to include us all. Following his strategy of highlighting aspects of human blindness and cognitive limitations, Hudson begins by noting that those most affected by sloth will be precisely those most resistant to both its diagnosis and cure (120). He suggests using literary portraits of characters affected by sloth to illuminate and identify our own condition (121–2), an explanatory note for his own use of parable, vignette, and story throughout the book. Sloth wears myriad faces: boredom and diversion-seeking, various versions of embracing the absurdity of life, suicidal tendencies (the ultimate escapism and detached indifference to this world), an embrace of demonic forms of freedom and fatalism, aesthetic pursuits of novelty, outright rejection of God's goodness (typified by Ivan Karamazov), and sundry forms of self-blame for personal defects that make us unworthy of anything better than the alienated wretchedness we find ourselves in. Each form of sloth slides toward increasingly entrenched unhappiness and failure to flourish, but also reveals a stance which simultaneously blocks one's way out. There's no more illustrative portrait of self-chosen misery and its natural consequences than this.

Chapter 5, "Ye Cannot Serve God and Mammon" offers the solution to these woes. Hudson here defends obedience as the crucial remedial virtue, and one that makes other virtues and virtuous activities fully

constitutive of flourishing in a way that they could not be without it. Obedience includes four elements: humility, restraint of selfish impulses, responsiveness to the demands of love, and a pro-attitude toward love itself (163–4). In a nutshell, it is having a rightly ordered will that submits to God's view of happiness and the good for human beings. In an intriguing move, Hudson makes a case for obedience as a "priming condition" or "state of readiness" for all other virtues (169, 172), and uses a parable (about paint primer, of course!) to illuminate the point (169–171). Hudson thinks obedience means at least giving up Mammon's resistance project, in which case there are only two stances possible: a will willing to submit to God's sway (the lack of resistance need not be wholehearted—yet) and a will that refuses. Hudson concludes with a final "recipe for well-being": "an obedience-primed, objective list" view (172, 174), noting that subjective happiness (in the form of the three elements of psychic affirmation) is on the list, precisely because obedience is *de facto* the condition of turning away from sloth, and with it, sloth's signature forms of unhappiness. He concludes by addressing concerns, two of which are especially worth noting. First, how does his argument diagnosing our condition and pointing to a conception of well-bring avoid the obscurity caused by the very cognitive and affective distortions and delusions outlined in the book? Second, how can anyone champion obedience as a virtue, much less one essential to well-being and happiness, when abuses in the name of obedience itself have contributed to so much human suffering and misery?

The book concludes that these worries are answerable, as well as any such worries can be, and concludes that a Christian view of human fallenness and flourishing can be summarized by giving us enough pessimism to confront ourselves realistically and but also enough hope that obedience can lead us back to a life of loving God and finding true fulfillment.

The sheer range of this book is enough to keep almost any philosophically interested reader entertained. The structure and steps of the argument are crystal clear and repeated throughout, which is helpful as Hudson navigates one substantial topic after another (theodicy, sin, happiness, virtue). The analysis of sloth at the heart of the book is especially engaging and diagnostically insightful. It also raises an interesting question about sloth's place on the list of deadly sins (see 99). It raises a question about pride's place, too, potentially complicating Augustine's influential characterization of the human sinful condition and pride's role as queen of the other vices. Both sloth and pride appear to be meta-level manifestations of resistance to God's will: pride "leads us to attempt to make the best of our disastrous situation on our own terms" (to pursue happiness under Mammon's restriction) and "the new modes of suffering expressed in the deadly sin of sloth are our earned and unhappy wages" (117). Is pride's excessive attachment to (or love of) our own will simply the flip side of sloth's deficient attachment to God and settled aversion to what his love demands (169)? Both are forms of resistance, and sloth's defiant forms could easily be mistaken for acts of pride. If obedience is the mirror

image of a slothful stance, this could challenge pride's reputation as "disobedience" and its rival claim to be obedience's opposite. However one answers this question, Hudson's account also seems to challenge sloth's place as just one more member of the traditional list of deadly sins. In its typical form (e.g. Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob*), pride is the root of six or seven others and serves as their root and their general form (i.e., each sin is a turning away from God toward idolatrous attachment to some created good or other). If Hudson is right about sloth, it seems to count less as a specific vice and more as a characterization of the state of having sunk into human sinfulness in general. Is sloth best characterized as a vice, or as a more general sinful condition, or as the "wages" of sin—the new misery that results from a pride-generated project and our best attempts to deal with that misery through denial, diversion, or defiance? Put differently, should we distinguish the initial decision of rebellious refusal (pride) from its retrenchment or ongoing stance of resistance (sloth) and also from its long-term psychological results (unhappiness)? Is sloth identified with a habit of will or its consequences or its symptomatic lifestyle? Given the depths of self-deception involved in Hudson's account, can we be caught up in sloth (the lifestyle) without any conscious resistance (the retrenched habit of resistance) or prideful decision to pursue our own way at all costs? One wonders how moral responsibility might be allocated in different cases.

Finally, we might note that the history of the vices began in a community of Christians who wrestled with sloth within the Christian life. Sloth had a sand-bagging effect on the already-very-committed disciple, who found him or herself struggling along the long road of sanctification. It was not a characterization of those who had chosen Mammon's way and then dug their heels in (i.e., what I take to be Hudson's characterization). So interesting questions remain about whether sloth is a sin of those who stand outside of faith or of those who falter in remaining faithful.

It's not easy to write an engaging book on sin. It's a dark topic and one we typically prefer to avoid. Hudson has done readers the great favor of making this study a clear and probing analytic exercise, a frankly realistic yet hopeful theological narrative about the human condition, and an exercise in self-examination that illuminates our own tendencies toward both delusion and disordered love. Covering so much complex territory over various areas of philosophy makes the book perhaps more suitable for mature philosophers rather than students, but this seems like a shame, since Hudson's tone and engaging style seem perfectly suited to reach that audience, and his answer-the-skeptic approach to various topics in the book might function as a reasonable and winsome way to gain a hearing for his religious views to the same. Not to mention that sloth's weary torpor and careless defiance seems like a pitch-perfect topic for an audience fatigued from a pandemic that exposed the existential emptiness that normal life successfully suppresses. And if they learn to appreciate some Milton along the way, so much the better.