

## The Pursuit of Happiness: Human Flourishing and Christian Ethics

People are still interested in “happiness,” in living a flourishing life. Classical (ancient and medieval) philosophers and theologians identified the pursuit of happiness as the central concern of ethics. Yet today evangelicals and others who hold traditional moral values typically see considerations of happiness and morality as incompatible. Ethics is about rules and restrictions rather than living a flourishing life. I regard this massive shift in ethical thinking as a mistake. It cuts us off from our moral tradition, eviscerates the heritage we seek to pass on to the next generation, and disengages us from vast common ground we share with unbelievers. In this session we begin a conversation about these matters, examining the nature of a flourishing-oriented ethic and exploring its possibilities for moral theology and apologetics.

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### I. The contemporary return to happiness

- A. Popular culture
- B. Positive Psychology
- C. Theology
- D. Academia

### II. A brief history of happiness

#### A. Classical background

##### 1. Philosophy

- a. Aristotle
- b. Seneca

##### 2. Theology

- a. Augustine
- b. Boethius
- c. Aquinas
- d. Protestant echoes

## B. Medieval shift

1. Theology
  - a. Scotus
  - b. Ockham
2. Philosophy
  - a. Kant
  - b. Mill

## C. Modern/postmodern development

1. Secular voices
2. Christian voices

## D. Contemporary consequences

1. Happiness is subjective and superficial, not grounded in nature or creation (happiness vs. nature, objective reality).
2. Happiness is non-moral or immoral, not grounded in what is good (happiness vs. morality).
3. Disintegration across the board: fact from value, morality from nature, faith from reason, morality from reason, morality from agency and character, moral formation from spiritual formation, morality from humanity, morality from worship.
4. But the desire for flourishing remains.

## III. The ethics of happiness

- A. Vision for re-integration.
- B. Vision for moral education: saying 'yes' versus saying 'no'.
- C. Justification for moral efforts that contribute to human flourishing, including common cause with non-Christians (e.g. human trafficking).
- D. Resources for moral reasoning in business ethics, bioethics, vocation.

E. Response to egoism and utilitarianism.

IV. The apologetics of happiness

A. Significant common ground for individual and institutional dialogue, including dialogue within moral common cause.

B. Augustinian moral argument for God:

1. There is a God-given universal desire for happiness (flourishing).
2. The universal human desire for flourishing can ultimately be satisfied only in a life of knowing, loving, and serving God.
3. Fallen human beings will seek to satisfy this desire with other things, which cannot ultimately satisfy.
4. Like Paul in Acts 17, we can affirm the search for flourishing, and help people go deeper than surface happiness.
5. All other candidates for happiness fall short, are vulnerable to misfortune, etc. We can show that only relationship with God is sufficient to ground secure, lasting, true flourishing.

V. Objections

A. Is it biblical? (Is it prosperity gospel?)

1. *Shalom* = flourishing, central to God's creative and redemptive intentions.
2. "Blessed" (including Sermon on the Mount) = flourishing.
3. Romans 12 – Christian ethics and teleological pursuit of good.
4. Biblical law (Deuteronomy) is aimed at flourishing.
5. Implied by robust doctrine of creation (natures, *teloi*).
6. Tempered by robust eschatology (new heavens and new earth).

B. Is it selfish?

1. Morality requires unselfishness, sacrifice—but that is not its point (Lewis, “Weight of Glory”).
2. Self-concern is legitimate, part of being a creature. Important distinction between selfish, unselfish, and selfless.

C. What about divine commands?

1. Divine commands are an important part of Christian morality, but not the only part.
2. Divine commands not arbitrary but aimed at flourishing.
3. Divine commands necessary to ground ultimate authority of morality.
4. Centrality of flourishing is consistent with robust view of divine commands (see Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin).

***Suggested Readings: (\* = most helpful to read in advance of seminar)***

\*Lewis, C.S., "The Weight of Glory." In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, edited by Walter Hooper, 25-40. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Charry, Ellen T., *God and the Art of Happiness*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010.

\*Horner, David A., "The Pursuit of Happiness: Why Christian Ethics Should Be Eudaimonistic." Unpublished. Presented at Evangelical Philosophical Society annual meeting, November, 2003 (2004). Available from European Leadership Forum.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Mind Your Faith: A Student's Guide to Thinking and Living Well*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Academic, 2011, chapter 12.

\_\_\_\_\_ and David R. Turner. "Zeal." In *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life*, edited by Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett, 72-103. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012.

Naugle, David K. *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives: Learning the Deep Meaning of Happiness*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008.

Plantinga, Cornelius Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.