

Eudaimonism

by Jennifer A. Herdt

Version 1.0 | Published 1 May 2026 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113039>

Other language version: [Eudaimonismus \(Deutsch\)](#)

Eudaimonism is a form of ethical reflection focused on eudaimonia, the highest good for human life, and its relationship to virtue. Early and medieval Christian thought, inheriting this pattern of thought from Greek moral philosophy, reshaped it in relation to biblical ethical traditions centered on right relationship to God; God was understood as final end and highest Good, in friendship with whom happiness is to be found. The ecstatic, self-transcending character of this tradition was lost in the early modern period, with the rise of utilitarianism. Contemporary debates about eudaimonism center around the question of whether it is improperly self-regarding.

Table of Contents

- [1. Eudaimonism within Ancient Philosophy](#)
- [2. Christian Eudaimonism and its Ecstatic Character](#)
- [3. Puzzles over Pure Love](#)
- [4. The Rise of Utilitarianism](#)
- [5. Modern Critiques of Eudaimonism](#)
- [6. Eudaimonism in Positive Psychology and Happiness Economics](#)
- [7. Eudaimonism within Contemporary Philosophical Theology](#)

[Recommended Literature](#)

[Citations](#)

[Citation Style](#)

[Metadata](#)

Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. Eudaimonism within Ancient Philosophy

Eudaimonism is a form of ethical reflection focused on eudaimonia, the highest good for human life, and its relationship to virtue. The term is derived from the Greek word *eudaimonia*, which is translated as happiness or flourishing. Ancient eudaimonism does not, however, refer to the pursuit of happiness in the modern sense of positive mood or subjective well-being. Ancient Greek thinkers regarded eudaimonia as the final end and unconditionally

complete good for human beings, that which all choose for its own sake, and that for which everything else is chosen. A core task of ancient ethical reflection was to evaluate candidates for this unconditionally complete good. Aristotle ^{GND}, for instance, noted that many thought that eudaimonia consisted in pleasure, wealth, or honor.^[1] He argued that none of these could serve as the unconditionally complete good, and that eudaimonia consists in living well and faring well, which required living in a way that displays the perfection of the distinctive human capacity of reason.^[2] This is possible through the life of virtue, which perfects capacities for both active civil life and philosophic contemplation.

All of the ancient ethical schools other than the Cyrenaics, who regarded the human end as maximizing present pleasure, agreed in this basic view that the human good and final end consist in eudaimonia, understood as constituted at least in part by living virtuously, even as the schools parted ways on such questions as whether virtue suffices for happiness, as the Stoics held, or whether it requires the presence of other enabling goods as well, as Aristotle ^{GND} argued.^[3]

2. Christian Eudaimonism and its Ecstatic Character

Christian ethical reflection has been deeply formed by this ancient pattern of reflection on happiness and the ultimate good. Augustine ^{GND}, for example, took for granted that happiness is human beings' final end and that there is a conceptual connection between our final end and highest good; ends are sought insofar as they are apprehended as good, and reflection on how to act drives towards a final end insofar as our various distinct ends must be ordered coherently in relation to one another.^[4] He also thought it to be evident that what is good for humans must be bound up with what is good as such. For Plato ^{GND}, this was the Form of the Good; for Augustine, it is God who is the Good itself that makes all good things good.^[5]

Integrating a core theme from the Hebrew Biblical tradition, Christian thinkers have understood happiness to be found in right relation to God and God's creation. Right relation to God involves loving God (cf. Love of God/ Love for God) and becoming more like God in character: "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Love of God thus has a theocentric and hence self-transcending or ecstatic character, focused primarily on God's goodness and worthiness to be loved and only secondarily on the benefits that flow to the self from loving God.^[6]

As Thomas Aquinas ^{GND} saw it, in his elegant 13th-century synthesis of Christian Platonic traditions with the newly rediscovered fullness of Aristotelian thought, God is the last end of humankind and indeed of all creation. All things are drawn to God in ways suitable to their constitutions, loving the common good; through the infusion of charity, the selfishness of fallen human nature (cf. art. Sin) can be healed and persons can come to love God more with the love of friendship than with the love of concupiscence. That is, persons can come to love God not solely because through doing so they themselves are made happy, but simply because of God's goodness, "because the Divine good is greater in itself, than our share of good in enjoying him."^[7]

3. Puzzles over Pure Love

Certain puzzles arose from the self-involving character of the love of God. Loving God perfects and fulfills the lover. It has been a recurrent concern of Christian thought to underscore the purity of the character of perfected love of God by seeking to strip it of any self-reference. Abelard ^{GND}, in the 12th century, insisted that God must be loved for God's absolute goodness, whatever he might do with us.^[8] Duns Scotus ^{GND} returned to this thought in the 14th century, arguing that the purity of one's love for God could be shown through a counterfactual: charity would love God above all for God's own sake "even if, to assume the impossible, all benefit for the lover were excluded."^[9] Martin Luther ^{GND} insisted that the love of concupiscence must not simply be overshadowed by the love of charity but utterly extinguish it.^[10]

The seventeenth-century French Archbishop François Fénelon ^{GND} echoed these earlier thinkers in insisting that the “pure love” of God submits to God’s will even if this be a will to damnation of the lover.^[11] Fénelon’s doctrine of pure love received papal condemnation in 1699 as a form of Quietism, which advocates self-annihilation and utter passivity to the divine will.

These movements are best understood as efforts to articulate the ecstatic character of Christian eudaimonism rather than as rejections of that eudaimonism.^[12] They have a paradoxical or counterfactual character, inasmuch as if eudaimonia is understood as essentially constituted by right relation to the highest good, it cannot be lost through right relation to the highest good.

4. The Rise of Utilitarianism

A major conceptual shift took place in the 17th century, as happiness came increasingly to be understood as a subjective state of consciousness capable of being produced in a variety of ways, and God no longer as final end and highest good but as the power capable of producing maximal human happiness, conceived of as “the best effect.”^[13] God’s end in creating the world, and thus the proper human end, unburdened of any worries over improper self-love, was taken to be human happiness. The American Declaration of Independence’s reference to the natural rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” testifies to this new attitude.

A voluntarist form of theological utilitarianism emerged in the 18th century in thinkers such as John Gay ^{GND} and Edmund Law ^{GND}, according to which human beings ought to obey divine commands because God alone is capable of securing happiness.^[14] Ecstatic eudaimonism, in which the pursuit of goods worth loving for their own sake leads to the love of God as goodness itself, became increasingly difficult to grasp.

5. Modern Critiques of Eudaimonism

It is in this context that the term eudaimonism was coined by Immanuel Kant ^{GND}, for whom it was a term of opprobrium.^[15] Human beings naturally desire happiness, he thought, but they should subordinate that desire to respect for the moral law.^[16] A eudaimonist is one who fails to do this, instead making immediate subjective feelings or the “consciousness of the agreeableness of life uninterruptedly accompanying his whole existence” into “the supreme determining ground of choice.”^[17] The emergence of deontology and utilitarianism as competing schools of modern moral philosophy reflects the dissolution of the Christian tradition of ecstatic eudaimonism.

Anders Nygren ^{GND} in the early 20th century charged Augustine ^{GND} with having contaminated the utterly selfless character of Christian agapic love through the introduction of eudaimonistic tendencies; he argued that Luther ^{GND} was responsible for purifying agape from pagan distortions introduced by Catholic thought.^[18] Nygren was responsible for an enduring disposition to associate Catholicism with eudaimonism and Protestantism with agapist anti-eudaimonism, despite the fact that both Catholic and Protestant thinkers have been concerned to purify the love of God of any self-referential or self-involving features.

6. Eudaimonism in Positive Psychology and Happiness Economics

The advent of positive psychology, with its turn away from pathologies to focus on the enhancement of happiness and flourishing, has ushered in renewed interest in eudaimonism.^[19] Researchers have argued that there are important differences between hedonic well-being, associated with pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and eudaimonic well-being, understood as a sense of purpose and meaning in life.^[20] Such approaches seek empirical answers to the question of what range of commitments and activities are capable of bringing a sense of meaningfulness. Many argue that the virtues are key to the securing of eudaimonic well-being, and thus seek to expand empirical understanding of

how the virtues develop and can be intentionally cultivated. Eudaimonism as understood within contemporary positive psychology diverges substantially from ecstatic eudaimonism, insofar as the latter focuses on finding the object or objects worthy of one's devotion, rather than on one's own life and the production of a meaningful life.

Debates over eudaimonia and flourishing are relevant to everything from personal life-projects to public policy. Happiness economics seeks to identify and measure the social factors that influence perceptions of happiness and life-satisfaction, exploring the relative significance for happiness of economic growth, stable institutions, relative and absolute wealth, and other factors.^[21] The World Happiness Report presses for happiness and well-being to be taken as criteria for government policy, drawing on evaluations collected in the Gallup World Poll.^[22] Happiness economics has helped draw attention to the inadequacy of Gross Domestic Product as a measure of the well-being of a nation. The conception of happiness it employs, however, is essentially the subjective notion that emerged in the 17th century.

7. Eudaimonism within Contemporary Philosophical Theology

Eudaimonism continues to be a topic of interest within contemporary philosophical theology and theological ethics. The late 20th-century retrieval of virtue ethics brought with it renewed engagement with ancient and medieval reflection on the highest good and final end, and in some instances a recovery of ecstatic eudaimonism. Yet early modern conceptual shifts continue to present obstacles to this recovery.

Both critics and defenders of eudaimonism have a tendency to conceive of subjective happiness not as that which flows from proper relation to the ultimate good but rather as itself the ultimate good. Critics understandably often echo Kant's GND critique, and argue that eudaimonism is tainted by egoism or improper self-regard.^[23] Some emphasize the insufficiency of virtue for securing happiness, or insist that Christians have a particular reason to reject eudaimonism, given the centrality of self-sacrifice to Christian discipleship.^[24] Defenders often proclaim the positive psychological benefits of the virtues. There are, however, some thinkers who have engaged in the recovery of the logic of ecstatic eudaimonism, seeking to make it intelligible once again.^[25] This includes showing how devotion to God as highest good is compatible with a host of sacrifices, up to and including the sacrifice of one's life, but not with the sacrifice of the right relation to God that is the key constituent of eudamonia.

Recommended Literature

Annas, Julia, *The Morality of Happiness*, Oxford 1993.

Brewer, Talbot, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Oxford 2009.

Couenhoven, Jesse, Eudaimonism, Virtue, and Self-Sacrifice, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/1 (2019), 7–14.

Darr, Ryan, *The Best Effect. Theology and the Origins of Consequentialism*, Chicago/London 2023.

Darr, Ryan, Teleology and Consequentialism in Christian Ethics. Goods, Ends, Outcomes, in: *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36/4 (2023), 906–925.

Fenelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe, *Pure Love*, in: *Selections*, Helms C. (Ed.), Mahwah 2006.

Frey, Jennifer, Aquinas on Sin, Self-Love, and Self-Transcendence, in: Frey, Jennifer/Vogler, Candace (Eds.), *Self-Transcendence and Virtue. Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, New York/London 2019, 62–83.

Frey, Jennifer, and Vogler, Candace (Eds.), *Self-Transcendence and Virtue. Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, New York/London 2019.

Hare, John, The Merits of Eudaimonism, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/1 (2019), 15–22.

Herd, Jennifer A., *Assuming Responsibility. Ecstatic Eudaimonism and the Call to Live Well*, Oxford 2022.

Jackson, Timothy, *The Priority of Love. Christian Charity and Social Justice*, Princeton/Oxford, 2003.

Nygren, Anders, *Agape and Eros. Part I – A Study of the Christian Idea of Love; Part II – The History of the Christian Idea of Love*, London 1953.

Porter, Jean, *Eudaimonism and Christian Ethics. A Scriptural Perspective*, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/1 (2019), 23–42.

Ryan, Richard M./Deci, Edward L., *On Happiness and Human Potentials. A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being*, in: *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001), 141–166.

Simmons, Frederick, *Christianity and Eudaimonia, Luck and Eudaimonism*, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/1 (2019), 43–67.

Tessman, Lisa, *Burdened Virtues. Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, Oxford 2005.

Citations

- ¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis 1985, 1095a15–30.
- ² Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b25–1098a20.
- ³ Cf. Annas, Julia, *The Morality of Happiness*, Oxford 1993, 329–333.
- ⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Sermons* 94A–150, in: Rotelle, John E. (Ed.), *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century* III/4, Brooklyn 1992, 150; Augustine, *City of God*, ed. Robert W. Dyson, Cambridge 1998, X.1, 390; XIX.1, 909.
- ⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, transl. R. P. H. Green, Oxford/New York 1995, I.34.38.
- ⁶ Cf. Herdt, Jennifer A., *Assuming Responsibility. Ecstatic Eudaimonism and the Call to Live Well*, Oxford 2022, ch. 2–3.
- ⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Maryland 1981, II-II.26.3 ad 3; Herdt, Jennifer A., *In the Furnace of Love. Formed for Charity (Exploring Personhood Conference 2023, Southeastern Seminary)*, 29.03.2023 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZVICaqXF9s>), accessed on 04.09.2025.
- ⁸ Cf. Abelard, Peter, *Expositio in epistolam Pauli ad Romanos III* (Migne, P. L. CLSSVIII, c. 892) (Burnaby 257).
- ⁹ Duns Scotus, John, *Ordinatio* 3, suppl. D. 27, in: *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, transl. Allan B. Wolter, Washington DC 1986, 427–428.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Luther, Martin, *Lectures on Romans. Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, Saint Louis 1972, 381.
- ¹¹ Cf. Fenelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe, *Pure Love*, in: *Fénelon. Selected Writings*, ed./transl. Chad Helms, Mahwah 2006, 224.
- ¹² Cf. Herdt, *Responsibility*, 83–84.
- ¹³ Cf. Darr, Ryan, *The Best Effect. Theology and the Origins of Consequentialism*, Chicago/London 2023, 97.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Darr, *Best Effect*, 188.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Reiner, Hans, *Art. Eudämonismus*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel 1972 (<https://doi.org/10.24894/HWPh.985>), accessed on 04.09.2025.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Kant, Immanuel, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge 1996, 143.
- ¹⁷ Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge 2015, 20.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Nygren, Anders, *Agape and Eros, Part I–A Study of the Christian Idea of Love; Part II–The History of the Christian Idea of Love*, trans. Philip Watson, London 1953.

- ¹⁹ Cf. Seligman, Martin, *Authentic Happiness. Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, New York 2002; Seligman, Martin, *Flourish. A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, New York 2011; Herdt, Furnace.
- ²⁰ Cf. Ryan, Richard M./Deci, Edward L., *On Happiness and Human Potentials. A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being*, in: *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001), 141–166.
- ²¹ Cf. Helliwell, John F./Barrington-Leigh, Christopher P., *Measuring and Understanding Subjective Well-Being*. NBER Working Paper Series 15887, Cambridge 2010
(https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w15887/w15887.pdf), accessed on 04.09.2025.
- ²² Cf. The World Happiness Report (<https://worldhappiness.report/about/>), accessed on 04.09.2025.
- ²³ Cf. Hare, John, *The Merits of Eudaimonism*, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/1 (2019), 15–22; Jackson, Timothy, *The Priority of Love. Christian Charity and Social Justice*, Princeton/Oxford 2003, 151; Hurka, Thomas, *Aristotle on Virtue. Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong*, in: Peters, Julia (Ed.), *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, New York 2013, 9–26.
- ²⁴ Cf. Tessman, Lisa, *Burdened Virtues. Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, Oxford 2005, 159; Simmons, Frederick, *Christianity and Eudaimonia, Luck and Eudaimonism*, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/1 (2019), 43–67, 56.
- ²⁵ Cf. Brewer, Talbot, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Oxford 2009, 37; Couenhoven, Jesse, *Eudaimonism, Virtue, and Self-Sacrifice*, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/1 (2019), 7–14, 12–13; Frey, Jennifer, *Aquinas on Sin, Self-Love, and Self-Transcendence*, in: Frey, Jennifer/Vogler, Candace (Eds.), *Self-Transcendence and Virtue. Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, New York/London 2019, 62–83; Herdt, Responsibility; Darr, Ryan, *Teleology and Consequentialism in Christian Ethics. Goods, Ends, Outcomes*, in: *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36/4 (2023), 906–925; Herdt, Jennifer A., *Jennifer Herdt on the Good Life with Co-Hosts Jon Stovell and Ryan Reed* (Bridging Theology Podcast), 31.10.2023 (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0DO1yNYgIkyLJm6jGUwfUr>), accessed on 03.09.2025.

Citation Style

Herdt, Jennifer A.: „Eudaimonism“, Version 1.0, in: *Online Lexicon for Systematic Theology*, ISSN 3052-685X, 1 May 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113039>

Metadata

DOI	https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113039
Creative Commons Licence Type	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND (4.0)
peer reviewed by	Frederick Simmons
Index Theologicus (IxTheo)	Agape , Final End , Flourishing , Happiness , Love , Quietism , Utilitarianism , Virtue

Subject Headings (LOC)	Agape , Final End , Flourishing , Happiness , Love , Quietism , Utilitarianism , Virtue
Keyword	Agape , Final End , Flourishing , Happiness , Love , Quietism , Utilitarianism , Virtue
Mentioned People	Peter Abelard , Aristotle , Augustine of Hippo , John Duns Scotus , François Fénelon , John Gay , Immanuel Kant , Edmund Law , Martin Luther , Anders Nygren , Plato , Thomas Aquinas

KEYWORDS

Agape

Final End

Flourishing

Happiness

Love

Quietism

Utilitarianism

Virtue