

7-1-2012

Book Review: Wise Stewards: Philosophical Foundations Of Christian Parenting

Michael McFall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

McFall, Michael (2012) "Book Review: Wise Stewards: Philosophical Foundations Of Christian Parenting," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol29/iss3/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

of today. The church was to be protected as a character-forming institution, and civic friendship based on virtue was to be cultivated to support a commitment to the common good.

In “The Psychology of Character and the Theology of Virtue,” Robert Audi examines the differences between character traits (personality) and moral character (virtue), arguing that “lovingness” stands as a “connecting” virtue among the rest of the “interpersonal” virtues, in a role analogous to the one Aristotle gives *phronesis*. He also considers and responds to several objections to the adequacy of virtue-based explanations of human behavior.

“How God Makes All the Difference” is the last essay, by Richard Swinburne. In it, he defines the difference between necessary and contingent *moral* truths, and shows the difference it makes for the content of and motivation for morality whether or not God exists. The view of the moral life he offers focuses mainly on debt, guilt, atonement, and reparations, and a Christian view of grace shows up only in a parenthetical comment near the end. This essay, of all of them, seemed to have the thinnest connection to the central theme of moral formation in virtue.

In sum, the volume offers a variety of perspectives on the possibilities and problems associated with formation in virtue both at the individual and at the political levels. I would highly recommend the individual essays as engaging, historically minded, clearly written, and thought provoking. The project certainly demonstrates the challenges of attempting a unified conversation even among the different areas of philosophy on the subject of virtue, not to mention integrating interdisciplinary perspectives on the nature of the human person as a foundation for moral development. Nevertheless, as Titus set out both the promise and areas of challenge in his opening essay, the project seems worth pursuing, despite the difficulties.

Wise Stewards: Philosophical Foundations of Christian Parenting, by Michael W. Austin. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2009. 192 pages. \$18.99 (paperback).

MICHAEL T. MCFALL, Bowling Green State University

Michael W. Austin’s *Wise Stewards* is a rare philosophical book insofar as it succeeds in being accessible but challenging to both academics and non-academics. A trained philosopher will occasionally demand more justifications or distinctions, but in these cases one can consult Austin’s more academic book, *Conceptions of Parenthood: Ethics and the Family*.¹ However, as the focus is parenting, a topic largely neglected by contemporary philosophers, *Wise Stewards* stands nicely on its own as an introduction to the philosophical foundations of parenting. Yet it is not merely an abstract

¹Michael W. Austin, *Conceptions of Parenthood: Ethics and the Family* (Aldershot, U.K./Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

analysis of parenting; it serves as an intensely practical guide. *Wise Stewards* is neither a philosophical or theological treatise nor a typical self-help book but a remarkable hybrid which yields a better understanding of the parent-child relationship and how this can help parents to parent more effectively, especially from a Christian perspective.

A need for a Christian ethic for parents is not assumed. Rather, Austin begins by justifying why the intra-family lived practical issues that he discusses are of more importance than the more frequently discussed issues of abortion and same-sex marriage. Austin's major claim is that Christian parents must properly understand their role in relationship to their children and to God: "Christian parents should see themselves as stewards of their children. Stewards do not own what they care for; rather, they are entrusted with caring for something that does not belong to them. Christian parents care for children on behalf of children" (24). This stewardship model is developed and defended against biological, causal, social constructionist, collectivist, child liberationist, and ownership accounts of parental rights. Special attention is given to the biological account in an extended discussion of J. David Velleman's "Family History."² Velleman argues that central to forging a meaningful human life is the self-knowledge we gain from knowing our biological relatives. Austin concedes that knowing one's biological parents can play a significant role, but he denies that it plays an irreplaceable role. Rather, he argues, "beliefs and desires are most central. . . . When I ask the question, 'Who am I?' the most significant aspect of my answer will be my evaluative beliefs and the relevant desires that I possess" (55). This fits with Austin's overall belief that a biological relationship to a child is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being the rightful parent of a child. Understanding this helps to correct our overvaluation of the biological connection between the parent and child and to account for the overlooked moral, social, and relational ties between parent and child.

Several philosophers, past and present, have defended a stewardship view of parenthood. Austin's account is unique because it is grounded in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He states, "the family is intended by God to be a reflection of the relationship that exists among the three persons of the Trinity" (69–70). This thesis merits independent book-length attention. Austin wishes to emphasize the great love and intimacy that exists between the members of the Trinity and then apply this to the parent-child relationship, but how this works needs clarity and development. He notes that children should not be approached as problems to be solved but, instead, appreciated and loved as mysteries—as all persons are mysteries and not mere projects. Perhaps, as the Trinity is mysterious, this link helps to clarify the overall thesis. Austin emphasizes that parents are stewards—those who care for things (children) that belong to someone else (God). To serve in this role, parents must "become like children"

²David J. Velleman, "Family History," *Philosophical Papers* 34 (2005), 357–378.

(Matthew 18:3), which allows parents to contemplate their own littleness and lack of sufficiency to learn the importance of trust (in God) and to learn from their children in addition to teaching them.

In “Key Virtues for Christian Families,” eight virtues are examined—faith, hope, love, humility, forgiveness, patience, compassion, and frugality. The key, which ties together the aforementioned virtues, is Austin’s observation that Christian parents sometimes think that their children will develop through a moral and spiritual osmosis. Consequently, parents believe their children will reject non-Christian cultural values simply if they lead good Christian lives. Yet modeling good Christian behavior is a necessary but insufficient condition for guiding one’s children to live Christian lives that trump opposing cultural values. Austin thus emphasizes the importance of regularly and repetitively encouraging children to practice these virtues.

The most extensive chapter, “Everyday Ethics for Christian Parents,” confronts moral issues regarding the religious upbringing of children pertaining to school choice and punishment. It also addresses challenges that arise from consumerism and technology. Austin engages a contrasting view put forth by Matthew Clayton in *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing*.³ The dominant liberal view is that children have a right to an open future. Clayton, while accepting this major thesis, proposes a more restrictive version that requires, for example, that children must consent to a particular religion if they are enrolled into a particular religion by their parents. Clayton understands that children of a certain age cannot genuinely consent, so in those cases parents are justified in cultivating neutral and liberal values such as kindness and generosity. Austin concedes that there is some danger in rearing children within a particular religion—namely, doing so may cause one’s children to follow Christ out of guilt (especially the kind of guilt that might emerge if a child of religious parents becomes non-religious). Austin uses this as a reminder that Christians have a responsibility to rear their children religiously but that they must do so carefully—simply forcing children to go to church is insufficient and potentially dangerous. Austin remains defensive, however, and fails to note that Clayton’s objection goes both ways. Guilt and tension might emerge when a child of religious parents becomes non-religious, but the same goes for the child of non-religious parents who grows up to be religious after receiving a pluralistic religious education with the aim to provide an open future. The open future thesis provides children with autonomy, but it is not value-neutral; it is a value-laden theory just as much as any religion.

Clayton argues that parents can give their children experiences of the Christian faith, including taking their children to church, so long as they do not intend to make their children Christians and so long as their children also learn about other nonreligious and religious ways of life. Austin

³Matthew Clayton, *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

responds, “we should not literally try to *make* our children follow Christ” but Christian parents should gently encourage this without requiring it (130). Furthermore, he remarks that Clayton’s view can “betray a lack of understanding of the nature of religious faith” because “While this approach does respect the child’s developing autonomy, it fails to also respect the depth and complexity of religious faith. Importantly, the child misses out on the experience of what it is like to belong to a particular religion. This type of experience is not to be had by a tour of the variety of world religions” (130–131).

There are two things worth noting here. The first is that Austin keenly touches upon the inevitable tension between a relativistic theory of value embodied in “open future” theories and an objective theory of value that a religion is bound to have. Yet despite allowing Christian parents to guide their children towards what he perceives as true, Austin carefully notes that all children are different and that there is no single way to provide an effective education for all children. Second, Austin claims that being part of a religion is qualitatively different from exploring religious (or non-religious) values. This is reasonable, but more could be said about what makes the religious experience so distinctive.

Austin argues that the *function*, not the *form*, of child discipline is most important. Likewise, the appropriateness of any punishment depends entirely on the particular child involved. This distinction demonstrates a pervasive theme of the book—how to parent the right way even though all children are different. This involves a struggle of how to do what is objectively correct despite there being no one proper specific way to parent all children.

Consumerism and sports conclude this chapter. Consumerism is a threat to Christian stewardship, and Austin is justified in criticizing it. Yet much of this discussion stems from Annie Leonard’s online video “The Story of Stuff,” which is more accurately a critique of the free market economy than just a critique of consumerism. Because consumerism and a free market economy are not identical, it would help to make this distinction accordingly. This is the only section of the book where Austin takes a position but does not entertain and develop objections to his position. Austin’s lengthy discussion of sports may seem out of place. Yet it is one of the most original contributions and helps explain how parents should deal with sports and, in general, parent. (Austin has written extensively elsewhere on the philosophy of sports.) He details the potential benefits and dangers of sports for children and defends a theory of competition. Perhaps most interesting is Austin’s observation that participation in sports “opens up many possible futures for a child that might otherwise remain closed” (159). This is noteworthy because Austin rejects the open futures model when discussing religious upbringing. It would thus be fruitful to explain why openness is acceptable in one sphere but not another.

The final chapter, “Reproductive Technologies and the Christian Family,” discusses anonymous gamete donation, the ethics of sex selection,

and emerging technologies. This chapter reiterates that we often do not take seriously enough the importance of bringing children into existence. Linking to an earlier critique of biological accounts, Austin notes, “the model of our own relationship to God as Christian is based on adoption” (181) and this has major ramifications for how we should parent and think about the parent-child relationship.

Wise Stewards is exactly the kind of book that Christian philosophers should write if they wish their work to have direct and meaningful spiritual benefits to a wide range of people. It addresses a topic of great importance, does so fairly, and deftly balances theory and practice.