

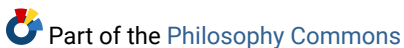
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## Book Reviews: 'God and the Art of Happiness' and 'Earthly Paradise: Myths and Philosophies'

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*God and the Art of Happiness*. Ellen T. Charry. Pp. xii, 299. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010.

*Earthly Paradise. Myths and Philosophies*. Milad Doueihi. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Pp. xiii, 171. Harvard University Press, 2009.

There is something fascinating about our emotions of joy and pleasure. This is because they signify the foundations of human existence. These positive emotions promise felicity, moments of leisure and visions of transformation. Granted such states of mind impel and orient meaning and thought, felicity leads towards the happiness of discovering God in the other's face. To capture moments of leisure becomes an art to encounter and nurture God's joyful word as it infinitely inspires hopes, dreams and imagination in the soul. And daring to believe that God delights with joy and pleasure in the soul, we learn that spontaneous actions of love and healing become a trajectory of transformation and human flourishing.

Both Ellen Charry and Milad Doueihi remind us that happiness, joy and pleasure are an integral part of theological discourse. But this is where their common ground ends. Doueihi's *Earthly Paradise. Myths and Philosophies* begins by taking the reader on a fantastic journey into the earthly paradise of an androgynous utopia in the alchemic visions of several Renaissance writers: François Rabelais, León Hebreo (Judah Abravenel), Jakob Böhme, Antoinette Bourignon, Gabriel de Foigny, Cyrano de Bergerac, Father François Garasse and Nicolas Malebranche. Whilst Augustine's God, the Creator, writes with the finger (that is with the heart) to transform

the earth ultimately through the Incarnation and Trinitarian revelation, Doueihi exemplifies divine writing of the heart taking shape in his chosen Renaissance writers. Verging on supersessionism and demythologising the presence of Hebrew from divine language to replace its texts and value with fantastic imaginations and metanarratives, Doueihi takes a step with his Renaissance partners and mentors into the heretical Manichean Creation narrative. The author's aim is to remind Christian orthodoxy to accept its limitations of theological explanations and compulsions to lie, or otherwise to submit to philosophy, and moreover especially to Nietzsche's philology.

Nietzsche's philology embraces the value of otium or the pleasure of spending moments learning to prudently engage thought artfully. Otium frees the reader from the discipline and inherent boredom of religion, and particularly the errors of Christianity accentuated by the self-absorbed and psychological mind of priests, violent theology, bad faith and the contamination of human experience. Taking a radical turn towards individualism, Doueihi's representation of Nietzsche parallels the Enlightenment's quest for the Historical Jesus in the New Testament.

Complementing Herman Samuel Reimaris' claim in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the biblical stories of Jesus' life and resurrection are fabricated, Nietzsche, by comparison, in *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, emphasises how Paul invented Christianity.

Furthermore, in relation to Nietzsche's philosophical and philological interpretation of the Genesis story of earthly paradise in the *Antichrist*, Doueihi draws the reader into a vision and tragedy of the Creator's failure, emerging mortality and fall into suicide. Moreover, Nietzsche sets out to negate and reduce God to a Greek pagan Apollonian and Dionysian character. Out of

boredom, God creates man and woman, yet fails to transform boredom into leisure. On the seventh day, the Apollonian God, faced with the tragedy of making his creation too beautiful, kills himself, that is to say, recuperates from being God, and transforms himself into his Dionysian other, the devil, the very leisure of God. Doueihî's overriding position serves to bring the reader to appropriate a true philological sense that order and chaos together unveil a life of diversion and recreation. Our true Eden lies in a philological space, climate and time of leisure, moments in the everyday that transcend the tragedy of God's boredom and blunder to create humanity with the comedy that the individual suddenly realises a sense of being his/her own master of learning in the art of leisure, of reading and writing well.

Perhaps, Doueihî has found his Nietzschean and Gnostic Eden, the Renaissance of his dreams, wherein his last chapter, he recounts a seventeenth-century French traveller's description of his birthplace, Ehden, in the Lebanese mountains. For Doueihî, everything in his book culminates as a reflection upon Ehden. He has readily taken to heart the Nietzschean sense of otium and brought the reader on a journey towards his beloved Ehden. The journey winds through France and Germany, sojourns in Athens, and avoiding Jerusalem, ends in Edhen: Doueihî's personal vision and sacred reading of earthly paradise.

In contrast to Doueihî's paradise that ultimately sees the destiny of the individual to take pleasure in the recreation and leisure of reading, writing and rewriting, Charry is happy enough for the individual to find human flourishing through Scripture and the very Word of God, the Christ, who teaches us how to be human, to be happy and to heal one another. Moreover, Charry develops a theology of happiness, or asherism (derived from the Hebrew word, asher, meaning

happy or blessed). Asherism, the path to happiness and human flourishing, displays four key elements: a soteriological character of healing love; an eschatological perspective of realising God's purpose for creation; a pastoral theological desire to practice the happy life through sustaining, healing, nurturing and guiding others; and finally, a spiritual practice of self-love that unfolds as the catalyst for living a biblical and Trinitarian life of following the Father's will, breathing joy and hope through the Holy Spirit, and of imitating, obeying and loving Jesus.

Guiding the reader towards the horizon of asherism, Charry explores the theological development of happiness in the writings of Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas and the Anglican bishop and theologian, Joseph Butler. Dealing with Augustine, Charry provides a marvellous account of Epicureanism, Stoicism and Neo-Platonism. Augustine drank deeply from the well of Stoic and Neo-Platonic wisdom whilst inheriting certain Epicurean values like the importance of psychological well-being. At the same time, Augustine put into question the stoic failure to acknowledge life's sufferings, misery and the power of sin, the Neo-Platonic absence of an incarnate God and Epicureanism's turn towards atheism and dismantling of key theological ideas. Charry learns from Augustine that happiness depends upon the subjective experience of God – knowing, loving and enjoying God. In Asherism this is translated into a sense of the bodiliness of enjoying through the enjoyment of God. This is also given a paschal quality whereby Charry describes Jesus' state of mind as being sanguine in his death. Hence, by participating in Christ's death, we may encounter the beauty of holiness. Christ's sacrifice for us identifies asherism where we begin to enjoy oneself with God, labouring in God's garden, and discovering the divine wisdom of bodiliness: that God is happy in our happiness.

One interesting development of Charry's theology of asherism is her understanding of self-love drawn from the sermons of Joseph Butler. Such a conception, in a Levinasian sense, speaks of an incarnation of *ipseity* or selfhood, namely, to be exposed to the moral conscience and the suffering world of the other. Self-love is a function of benevolence inferring that by being good, one is listening to the moral conscience and seeking out a life of moral well-being. Emotions also play an important role here by helping to orient the self towards goodness.

In three vignettes towards the end of the book, Charry brings to the reader's attention examples of asherism in a pastoral theological setting that draws into perspective Butler's sense of self-love through the soteriological praxis of healing and a realised eschatology of working with God. Simply, this is the beauty of holiness and the calling to take pleasure and find happiness in nurturing one's own needs to love others. In the first vignette, Eva, learns the value of being spontaneous, to bring a lost dog back to its owners. Such stirring of spontaneity animating self-love transforms into the bodiliness of enjoying the enjoyment of God. In the second vignette, Amanda, having suffered the trauma of her father abusing her mother, runs away to a conservative evangelical college to study rather than following her Father's IT career. Amanda is a victim and, tormented by self-hatred, begins to harm others. A friend confronts her leading to conversion to the wounded Christ who embraces her woundedness. By moving from self-hatred to self-love, glimpses of asherism begin to take form. Her wounds begin to heal and the scars become symbols and reminders that she has made a radical turnabout towards living a life as an image of God's joy and happiness.

In the third vignette, the mood becomes more sombre and grave. A couple, Nancy and Bob, take care of an abused six year old boy, named Donald. The couple's efforts fail to help Donald. Bob dies five years later, and when Donald is sixteen he murders Nancy over some money he took from her that he thought was his. Donald is imprisoned, yet he is not forsaken. Another woman, Barbara, journeys into his life with the gift of healing and hope that at the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible. She had known Donald since he was eleven, and begins through the language of faith to rebuild his identity with the gift of divine providence. The process takes many years, yet Barbara's practice of asherism sees the success of love healing in Donald as well as in her own soul. Charry's Eden is in the healing of relationships, nurturing the possibility to enjoy through the enjoyment of Christ who is the forgiveness of sins.

Doueihl and Charry remind the reader that paradise beckons our imaginations and stories of life to find meaning from the Biblical Story of Creation. Whilst Doueihl has proclaimed a vision of Eden as Ehden, a paradise in which one must journey via Athens rather than Jerusalem, Charry has found her Eden by way of Jerusalem, embodying the value of Judaism and Christianity.

Doueihl succeeds by bringing the reader into contact with fantastic stories and adaptations about the biblical narrative of earthly paradise. Charry on the other hand, succeeds by developing her own theology of asherism that especially exemplifies a profound connection between purified eros and agape. Not only does melancholy bring them together, as Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests, but also happiness and joy.