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### Victor Lee Austin, *Christian Ethics: A Guide for the Perplexed*: Reviewed by Travis Pickell

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Victor Lee Austin, ***Christian Ethics: A Guide for the Perplexed***, Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London, 2012; 177 pp.: 9780567032195, £50.00 (hbk), 9780567032201, £14.99 (pbk), 9780567639998, £14.99 (ebook)

How does one write an introductory text without being overly reductive, on the one hand, or unnecessarily bogging down the reader with finer points, on the other? Imagine trying to make a topic as expansive as Christian ethics intelligible to the ‘perplexed’ among us. Victor Lee Austin, Theologian-in-residence at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue (NYC), admirably navigates between these twin pitfalls in this useful and concise volume.

Austin begins with an apologetic for ethics as a rational enterprise. He pithily describes common challenges to the reasonableness of ethics, offering brief responses to each – for example, that most people are either unwilling or unable to live according to the view in question. Chapter 2 presents a ‘narrative’ understanding of Christian ethics expressing that Christian ethics is both *distinctive* (not just another way of saying ‘ethics’) and *universal* (true for all people). Austin’s discussion of ‘narrative theology’ is careful and insightful, if at times flirting with the overly technical. Chapter 3 provides a fairly standard discussion of deontological (duty-based), utilitarian (outcome-based) and virtue (character-based) ethics, as one expects to find in an introductory ethics text. The title of the chapter (‘Three Approaches to Being Fully Human’) hints that Austin finds the third option most satisfactory.

From this point forward, Austin speaks almost exclusively in the idiom of virtue theory, leading this reviewer to wonder whether, perhaps, a better title for this book would have been ‘Catholic Moral Theology’ or ‘Virtue Ethics: A Guide for the Perplexed’. Chapter 4 turns to Aquinas’s ‘fourfold’ conception of the human good (i.e., self-preservation, procreation, sociality and knowing God) and a discussion of three of the cardinal virtues: temperance, courage and justice. Chapter 5 argues that prudence – what Austin calls ‘good sense’ – is necessary to guide the cardinal virtues towards the good, and that the theological virtues (faith, hope and love) are necessary to order the virtues towards their proper end in God. In Chapter 6, the capstone of the book, Austin argues that friendship with others and with God is the highest human good, and offers an interesting interpretation of heaven as the eschatological realization of ‘friends living together’. In the final chapter Austin turns to disability and personhood, an important consideration

to address, as this is often among the first objections to be raised by those who are uncomfortable with an ‘ethics of excellence’. Austin argues, from a Trinitarian perspective, that personhood is a relational category, rather than a quality one possesses. On these grounds, those with disabilities are to be considered full persons, deserving of respect.

Austin writes clearly and cogently with an eye towards the practical and pedagogical. This volume is peppered with Austin’s classroom experiences; teachers will find many helpful tips in these pages (e.g., using the novel *Emma* to spark a discussion about prudence). At times Austin’s discussion can be overly technical, but his frequent use of metaphors to illuminate abstract concepts and the helpful ‘notes for further reading’ at the end of each chapter make this book an accessible introduction for the beginner in Christian ethics or Catholic moral theology.

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