*Putting Others First: An Interdisciplinary Examination of the Christian Moral Ideal*

Synopsis

One of the foundational questions of the moral life is a question about the relativeimportance of different parties’ interests. When I am deciding what to do, is it best for me to treat my own interests as more important than the interests of others, others’ interests as more important than my own, or my own and others’ interests as equally important? The aim of this book is to explore and ultimately defend an answer to this question that is inspired by a plausible reading of foundational texts of the Christian New Testament. I will develop an account of a trait of character that constitutes a way of *putting others first* in the process of deciding what to do, and I will examine this trait from philosophical, theological, and scientific perspectives.

The trait of character on which the book focuses is others-centeredness. Others-centeredness is a tendency to treat each other person’s interests as more important than one’s own interests for purposes of deciding what to do, just because they are another’s. An others-centered person takes the fact that a course of action will promote a good or prevent a bad for someone else to provide greater reason for pursuing that course of action than is provided by the fact that a course of action will promote a comparable good or prevent a comparable bad for himself. For the others-centered, the interests of others are weighed more heavily in the process of deliberation than the interests of self, and this makes a significant difference for how they live.

Over the course of six chapters, the book will investigate others-centeredness so understood by drawing upon a wide range of academic disciplines including biblical studies, feminist scholarship, philosophy, psychology, and theology. The first, introductory chapter explains the nature of others-centeredness as a character trait in detail, identifies and advocates for the methodological approach to religious virtue theory taken in the book, and proposes points of contact between the present study and other contemporary projects in virtue theory. The second chapter, focused on biblical studies, argues that foundational texts of the New Testament—especially Philippians 2:1-5—are plausibly read as advocating for others-centeredness. The third chapter begins building a case for thinking that it is better to possess others-centeredness than not to possess it. Focusing on positive values that others-centeredness uniquely enables one to promote, beginning with interpersonal unions, I develop a provisional case for the value of others-centeredness from three distinct metaethical perspectives: consequentialism, constructivism, and exemplarism. The fourth chapter confronts critical, challenging questions about the value of others-centeredness, including whether others-centeredness requires an impossibly strong sort of altruism, whether it leads its possessors into self-destructive relationships, and whether it leads to paternalism toward others. I argue for a negative answer in each case. Chapter five examines the place of others-centeredness within a person’s moral psychology by considering the relationship between others-centeredness and other virtues and vices, including love, forgivingness, contrition, hate, and envy. The final chapter focuses on the science of others-centeredness. Here I review relevant scientific findings that illuminate the value and etiology of others-centeredness, and I make constructive proposals for further future empirical study of the trait.