

BOOK REVIEW

*The humble creative: Moral vice and the pursuit of flourishing creativity*

Niermann, M. (2021). *The humble creative: Moral vice and the pursuit of flourishing creativity*. Wipf & Stock. 126 pages.

Just be you. This is the mantra of the current age. Society idolizes authenticity through cultural liturgies such as “Live your best life” or “Live your truth.” However, two questions soon arise: Is authenticity a problem? Is it not a good thing? Niermann approaches these questions from his role as Associate Professor of Architecture and Creativity at California Baptist University. Soon after starting this book, the reader begins to ask the following question: Can creativity be cultivated from only unfiltered authenticity, or is there an alternative approach?

A Christian theology of creativity delves into the call to cultivate culture, seen in Genesis 1-3, but also reminds that the Christian is only able to create because of who his creator is. Andy Crouch discusses this by stating, “God is at work precisely in these places where the impossible seems absolute. Our calling is to join him in what he is already doing—to make visible what, in exodus and resurrection, he has already done” (Crouch, 2008, p. 216). In the same tone, Niermann launches from the premise that one’s creativity mirrors the creative God in His likeness (Niermann, 2021, pp. ix–x). Niermann continues by defining moral vice and an ethic of authenticity in chapter one. He walks readers into this understanding from the direction that seeking the “authentic self” leads, more often than not, towards a cultivation of pride and vice (Niermann, 2021, p. 16).

Continuing this premise, Niermann delves into the different vices, such as vainglory, envy, sloth, anger, lust, and greed. Yet thankfully he does not stop at just a list. Niermann challenges readers to see how those vices can either lead to sin or become opportunities for the Gospel to come in and bring vibrant life. Theory must lead to application thus; Niermann presents disciplines for the reader to use in their growth regarding each specific vice. At the same time, Niermann acknowledges the difficulties of applying these. He shares that “all the disciplines above will be hard and feel unnatural. Anytime habits are broken and instincts are denied it feels unnatural” (Niermann, 2021, p. 34).

Niermann’s treatment of the vice of sloth should not be skimmed over, especially when it comes to preparing students for beginning their vocational journey. For many, sloth is a synonym for laziness. Niermann argues that activity should not be the litmus test for sloth, but rather one’s personal posture should be the litmus test (Niermann, 2021, pp. 56–58). He points readers to DeYoung’s definition of sloth as “*apathy or resistance to the demands of love*” (DeYoung, 2009, p. 81). This discourse fosters a deeper questioning for the reader, either as a professor, student, or marketplace worker, to assess their own posture. Niermann drives the point home when he writes, “We are called to love God and our neighbors. This takes effort. This is hard work. Any avoidance of this duty through laziness or busyness is the vice of sloth” (Niermann, 2021, p. 58). Niermann solidifies the book’s main point by reiterating the truth that “who we are affects our creativity. Our moral character can either lead to disordered creativity or cultivate a creativity that flourishes” (Niermann, 2021, p. 118).

Thankfully, readers are not left here but instead are given fourteen ways to cultivate this humble creative life (Niermann, 2021, pp. 119–121). This list is not the final point but rather a tool for a deep-abiding life filled with dependence on the one who forms us, God himself (Niermann, 2021, p. 122). Such a concept is not something new but very much rooted in Christian tradition. The wisdom that Niermann illustrates here through this list helps both the students on their journey to becoming a “humble creative” and the academic investing and forming students to foster kingdom impact and live out their faith in a truly counter-cultural way.

An essential task in forming the next generation in gospel-centric methodologies is to help them see that they do not have to choose between creativity and faith. It is time to rewrite the narrative from disordered to ordered through rooting one’s moral formation in addition to their vocational formation (Niermann, 2021, p. 121). This increased emphasis will truly have resounding implications for society and the Kingdom. *The Humble Creative: Moral Vice and The Pursuit of Flourishing Creativity* has countless implications for higher education and other forms of vocational

discipleship, proving its value and necessity to be read on a larger scale.

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