
Introduction

The Question of Moral Excellence

THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY BEQUEATHED by Augustine of Hippo (b. 354 AD) to the Catholic Church and the Western philosophical tradition has indeed been great. As one of the most influential figures in the history of Western thought, there are few fields related to theology or philosophy that have been unaffected by his work. A prolific author, Augustine is perhaps best known for the theological, philosophical, and moral insights of his *Confessions* and the comprehensive theology of history he presents in *The City of God*. Despite the importance of these two works, stopping at them without examining any of Augustine's remaining thought would truly be to remain at the summit of an enormous iceberg. In addition to his responsibilities as bishop, Augustine not only engaged in the intellectual debates of his day, controversies with Manichees, Donatists, and Pelagians being primary examples, but also engaged intellectual aspects of his faith that transcended the time and place of his ministry. Whether writing his commentaries on Scripture or engaging in the speculative examination of the Christian God in *The Trinity*, Augustine invariably produced writings of such insight and originality that he has held the attention of Christian and non-Christian readers during his day and throughout the sixteen hundred years separating him from the present.

The subject of my study, an issue on which Augustine spent significant time and effort, is the paradoxical view he formulated concerning the relation between humility and moral excellence. For Augustine, only the humble person can truly achieve greatness.¹ In a sermon delivered sometime after the year 420 AD he asserts,

1. For the purpose of my study I will use the terms greatness and excellence as

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

We are striving for great things; let us lay hold of little things, and we shall be great. Do you wish to lay hold of the loftiness of God? First catch hold of God's lowliness. Deign to be lowly, to be humble, because God has deigned to be lowly and humble on the same account, yours not his own. So catch hold of Christ's humility, learn to be humble, don't be proud. Confess your infirmity, lie there patiently in the presence of the doctor. When you have caught hold of his humility, you start rising up with him.²

It will become evident over the course of this study that the given text is not an exception from Augustine's typical view of humility and greatness. He repeatedly and emphatically asserts that human excellence comes by way of humility.

Despite Augustine's emphasis and his repute as one of history's great thinkers, it is quite legitimate to ask, "How is this the case?" or maybe better, "Does the idea that humility leads to greatness make any sense at all?" To answer these questions, one could turn to other Christian thinkers to see if there is a consensus on the issue. The Christian tradition, although not completely unanimous on the subject, certainly provides much support for Augustine's position.³ Given Augustine's influence over that tradition, however, it seems better to look at other traditions and non-Christian thinkers to find a source less affected by Augustine's thought through which to evaluate his stand on humility and greatness. Turning to Aristotle (b. 384 BCE), another of history's most influential thinkers, we see a position quite literally opposed to that of Augustine. For Aristotle, the greatest person is the person of magnanimity. Magnanimity is the crown of all the other virtues and as such receives significant attention from Aristotle. One of

roughly equivalent. Although greatness implies a public aspect—i.e., the praise that others offer to a person of excellence that is lacking in the word excellence—we will see that both terms are apt descriptions of the virtue ascribed to a person of merit. In instances where the social or public implications of excellence are discussed, I will use the term greatness. In discussions where the public aspect is not central, I will use greatness and excellence interchangeably.

2. Augustine, S. 117:17 (WSA III/4:220), *Sermons*, in *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle. Hereafter cited as WSA followed by part, then volume, then page.

3. Benedict of Nursia, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas are just three examples of eminent Christian thinkers who support and propose a view of humility and greatness similar to that of Augustine's. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2.161.5: "Humility holds the first place, inasmuch as it expels pride . . . and makes man . . . open to receive the influx of divine grace . . . In this sense humility is said to be the foundation of the spiritual edifice."

magnanimity's salient features, in Aristotle's view, is its disinterest in small matters. The magnanimous person does few things, but the few things he or she does undertake are grand in scope and value.⁴ Aristotle's position seems to be in direct contradiction to that of Augustine.

While it is by no means sufficient to deduce a fundamental disagreement between thinkers on the basis of two isolated texts, these statements do represent a substantive and significant difference that runs throughout the course of Western thought, from its roots in classical antiquity through modernity and even to the recent focus on the place of virtue within ethical discourse. To thoroughly examine the differences that lay behind the positions these citations represent, it is necessary to explore the philosophical, theological, anthropological, and moral principles supporting each view.

Virtue is one concept that holds particular importance for the topic. Fortunately the idea of virtue and the individual virtues themselves have become key topics in contemporary philosophical and theological literature.⁵ Current research in philosophy and theology has produced some positive appraisals for the virtue of humility,⁶ while contemporary feminist theology has generally questioned its value.⁷ In a recent exchange between philosophers, Larry Arnhart lays the lack of magnanimous statesmen in the twentieth century at the doorstep of Christian humility.⁸ In response, Carson Holloway asserts that Christian humility does not prevent the development of magnanimous statesmen and goes on to argue that the closely related Christian principle of charity is the only sure means to inspire a magnanimous person to undertake the burdens of statesmanship.⁹ The contemporary outlook on the value of humility is quite varied, depending in large part upon the moral and anthropological presuppositions an author brings to its examination.

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1124b25.

5. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Peter Berkowitz's *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, and Romanus Cessario's *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* are just three recent samples of philosophical, political, and theological approaches to the study of virtue.

6. Cf. Fullam, *Virtue of Humility*, Ruddy, "Christological Approach to Virtue, and Bobb, "Competing Crowns" for three recent studies on the importance of humility.

7. See Ruddy, "Christological Approach to Virtue," 33–47 for a summary of contemporary feminist thought regarding humility.

8. Arnhart, "Statesmanship as Magnanimity," 263–83.

9. Holloway, "Christianity, Magnanimity, and Statesmanship," 581–604.

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

Despite the competing views in the contemporary dialogue concerning humility, one need only look to the philosophers of modernity to find a more unified and frankly hostile approach to the idea. The most passionate critiques of humility flow from the pens of many of the most prominent thinkers in the modern period. David Hume, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche unabashedly criticize the role of humility in civil society. For Hume (b. 1711), an authentic humility that goes beyond the façade of external modesty is valued by no one.¹⁰ Marx (b. 1818) likewise disparages humility, which he saw as a drain to the revolutionary drive he sought to inspire in the proletariat. He saw Christian humility as an impediment to the courage and pride through which the working class could assert its independence.¹¹ Nietzsche (b. 1844), whose work criticizes both Jewish and Christian thought, is no less sparing in his criticism of humility. He views humility as a sham virtue, foisted upon humanity by the lying rhetoric of a slave mentality.¹² Yet despite the vigor of modern attacks, the Christianity of the same period continued to uphold the traditional value of humility.¹³

The prize at stake in the controversy regarding humility is nothing less than the meaning of human excellence. The debate seeks to answer what it means to be a great human person. To put it in the Aristotelian terms of Alasdair MacIntyre, it pursues a response to the question, “What sort of person am I to become?”¹⁴ Or, from the perspective of Ciceronian terminology, it seeks to articulate a vision of that in which the glory of the human person consists.

The thesis of my study is the idea that the height of human greatness includes and is dependent upon humility. In recognizing the importance of humility to greatness one can see in Augustine’s counterintuitive argument for an intrinsic relation between humility and greatness an accurate and authentic description of moral excellence that exceeds notions of human greatness that either neglect or repudiate humility. Humility is an indispensable attribute for the development of human excellence, and few can match Augustine’s understanding and advocacy for that position.

10. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* 3.3.2

11. Marx and Engels, “Excerpt From The Communism of the Paper Rheinischer Beobachter,” 268–69.

12. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 1.13.

13. One example of the continuing Christian tradition regarding humility in the modern period is Pope Leo XIII’s treatise *The Practice of Humility*.

14. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 118.

In contrast to Augustine, I will use the thought of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche as the two authors best suited to represent understandings of excellence that reject humility as an integral element of human greatness. The rationale for my focus on Hume and Nietzsche is twofold. First, both Hume and Nietzsche provide explicit and well-formulated treatments of the relation between humility and greatness. Their quality of thought and cogency of expression on the issue have few equals and thus provide an important and influential counter to the thought of Augustine. A second, related reason stems from the historical influence of each thinker. Alasdair MacIntyre describes Hume's influence on the Scottish Enlightenment and the subsequent development of modern moral philosophy in pointed terms. "He (Hume) was identified, and rightly so, as the antagonist *par excellence*, the philosopher whose views had to be defeated in open philosophical debate. He became the one thinker in opposition to whom decade after continuing decade Scottish philosophers had to frame their enquiries."¹⁵ MacIntyre also champions the importance of Nietzsche's influence, asserting that Nietzsche is the moral philosopher without peer in relation to what MacIntyre calls the Enlightenment project to discover the rational foundations of an objective morality. This is the case from MacIntyre's perspective because Nietzsche was the first philosopher to understand "not only that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will, but also the nature of the problems that this posed for moral philosophy."¹⁶ Although, as a prominent contemporary philosopher there are many who argue against MacIntyre's controversial positions,¹⁷ there are few who would raise objections concerning his emphasis on the importance of Hume and Nietzsche to modern and contemporary philosophical discourse.

Ancient and Modern Approaches to Human Greatness

Any philosophical argument for a particular conception of human greatness is an embodiment of the philosopher's view concerning the nature, purpose, and goodness of the human person. Perhaps the one (and possibly only) element in common to the thinkers I will examine to support the argument of my study is the fact that they approach the idea of human

15. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 322.

16. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 113–14.

17. Cf. Keating's, "Ethical Project of Alasdair MacIntyre," 101–16 for an overview of the reception of MacIntyre's thought.

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

excellence through moral principles. In the case of Aristotle, the goodness of the human person is seen to lie in a person's ability to conform his or her moral activity to right reason. Excellent habits or virtues, in his view, empower a person to achieve such conformity. A person's development of virtue is the result of repeatedly making good moral choices. For Aristotle, then, the greatest people are those who have developed the habits of excellence.¹⁸ The epitome of excellence in Stoic thought is the sage. Although the Stoics placed significant emphasis on the knowledge of a sage, a true sage was not only knowledgeable but was also able to live a life of virtue in accordance with nature that is in conformity to the reason that guides the fate of the cosmos.¹⁹

A modern example of the approach to human greatness through morality can be seen in the thought of David Hume. Although clearly at odds with the moral philosophy of classical antiquity, Hume still proposes his understanding of human greatness within the context of his moral thought. For Hume, the excellence of the human person is derived from the feelings of approbation elicited by the moral choices of a particular person.²⁰ From the view of the Western philosophical tradition, both ancient and modern, moral greatness is fundamental to human greatness.

Despite this one shared aspect, however, there is a significant divide between the ancient authors of my study and the modern regarding their approach to human excellence. Rationality and intelligibility lay at the center of ancient moral analysis. We will see that Aristotle, Stoics, Neo-Platonists, and the Christian philosophy of Augustine all propose an intrinsic link between intellect and morality. Fundamental to the eudaemonistic moral vision of these ancient thinkers is the integration of reason into the behavior and character of the human person. Although each of the ancient schools has different views of virtue, common to each of them is the idea that the character of a person must be integrated with reason for a person to achieve virtue. We will see that the link between virtue and reason is crucial to each school's understanding of human excellence, despite the differences in their approach to virtue. Such is not the case, however, for the selected modern authors, Hume and Nietzsche. Both, for different reasons,

18. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a7–18 for an initial summary on the good of the human person. This is a topic I will develop later in my study.

19. Diogenes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.87–89. Cf. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics*, 101.

20. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* 3.1.2.

reject reason as integral to the moral life. For Hume, reason is an inactive principle that of its nature only educates and cannot inspire the choices that constitute moral activity.²¹ Emotion and feeling rather than reason are the principles, according to Hume, that drive moral choice and therefore serve as the guiding principles of his ethics. Nietzsche, on the other hand, sees the expression of power as the principle governing morality, going so far as to assert a view in which the virtues are seen as irrational rather than rational.²² “An earthly virtue is it which I love: little prudence is therein and the least every day wisdom.”²³ The lack of reason in Nietzsche’s moral theory is one of the most significant elements separating his thought from that of his eudaemonistic predecessors.

Given the relationship established between human greatness and moral theory by ancient and modern philosophers, my methodology will be to examine the moral principles that constitute human greatness in their view. By means of this examination I will demonstrate how those principles yield a particular understanding of the relation between humility and greatness. I will also demonstrate why these eminent authors offer such profoundly different accounts of the issue.

Method and Structure

The central focus of my study will be the moral thought of Augustine as it relates to his understanding of humility and greatness. Before addressing that thought, however, I will cover three ancient philosophers pertinent to the topic. I have chosen the ancient thinkers to be investigated in the study on the basis of two criteria: (1) the relevance of an author’s thought to the topic of humility and greatness and (2) the effect of an author’s thought on the views of Augustine. I will begin my discussion in chapter 1 with the thought of Aristotle, articulating the moral and anthropological principles that formed his view of the magnanimous person, who occupies the height of Aristotelian moral virtue. Despite the relatively indirect exposure of Augustine to Aristotle’s moral theory (it is likely that the only work of Aristotle’s read by Augustine was *The Categories*),²⁴ it is important to include Aristotle’s thought in the study for two reasons. First, although not a direct influence

21. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* 3.1.1.

22. Hunt, *Nietzsche and the Origin of Virtue*, 81.

23. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 1.5.

24. Augustine reports his study of the categories in *Conf.* 4.16.28.

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

on Augustine's intellectual development, Aristotle's thought was to grow in stature as the centuries passed,²⁵ becoming one of the primary sources for the elaboration of medieval philosophy, and in many ways, a primary foil in the development of modern thought. For example, Aristotle's rational understanding of the virtues provides a significant contrast to the feelings-based approach of Hume and the will to power Nietzsche associates with virtue. As a consequence, the Aristotelian tradition is of great importance to the study's comparison of modern views of humility and greatness with those of Augustine. Second, given the merit and importance of Aristotle's moral thought, any philosophical analysis of the relation between humility and greatness must account for the treatment of magnanimity and its related vices provided by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Following my discussion of Aristotle's moral principles I will consider the Stoic moral thought communicated through the pen of Cicero (b. 106 BCE). The philosophical influence of Cicero on Augustine can hardly be overstated. It was the *Hortensius* of Cicero (read by Augustine at the age of nineteen) that would prove instrumental in changing Augustine's course from a career as a professional rhetorician to that of a seeker of wisdom.²⁶ Although Cicero considered himself a skeptic, he is one of the most important sources for Stoic moral thought, as his *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* is one of only three primary treatises concerning the Stoic ethical system in use by scholars today.²⁷ Part of the influence Cicero exerts upon Augustine stems from his role as a transmitter of Stoic moral doctrine. Augustine's moral theory has been characterized as Stoic appropriations of Platonic thought, where the Stoic equation of virtue to happiness is combined with a Neo-Platonic understanding of happiness as the mind being possessed by transcendent truth. Augustine's combination of the two yields

25. The importance of Aristotle's thought is manifest in such later works as the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. Even where Aristotle's arguments are rejected, his influence is still significant. Cf. Gerson, "Plotinus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Metaphysics," 3–21 for a discussion in which Aristotle's primary argument on a topic is rejected, but his terminology and central presuppositions are adopted.

26. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.4.7. Cf. Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics*, 486–95 for a discussion concerning the influence of the *Hortensius* on the thought of Augustine. Hagendahl characterizes that influence as sparking Augustine's interest in philosophy rather than causing him to lay aside secular ambition or embracing Christianity, both of which would come later in Augustine's life. Cf. Testard, *St. Augustin et Cicéron*, 18–49 for further discussion regarding the importance of Cicero and the *Hortensius* to Augustine's intellectual development.

27. Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism*, 5.

an understanding of happiness in which virtue becomes beatitude once a person has appropriated wisdom, whose source is the Logos of God.²⁸ In addition to his influence on Augustine, Cicero's noteworthy reflections concerning the glory of the human person are directly relevant to the study of humility and greatness, and thus also merit examination in my study.

A second school of philosophy that had significant impact on Augustine's intellectual development was that of third century Platonism, labeled neo-Platonism by modern scholars. The philosopher Plotinus (b. 205 AD) was arguably the most significant exponent of neo-Platonism and will therefore be the focus of my treatment regarding the relation between Platonism and the thought of Augustine.²⁹ Although modern scholarship is unsure if Augustine actually read the work of Plotinus³⁰ (Augustine uses only the general label of Platonists in his mention of their books in the *Confessions*),³¹ many similarities with neo-Platonism as articulated by Plotinus can be seen in Augustine's work, and many of these similarities have particular bearing on his understanding of morality and human excellence. Neo-Platonic metaphysics provided a new context in which Augustine could understand the problem of evil, which separated him from the teachings of the Manichaeans and, more importantly for my study, provided a significant context for his understanding of moral evil.³² Although not generally remembered for his moral thought, Plotinus's understanding of *tolma* as the reason for the soul's fall into matter³³ and his emphasis on the purifying aspect of virtue³⁴ would find significant parallels in Augustine's understanding of morality. In addition, Plotinus's portrayal of the human person's highest destiny as

28. Wetzell, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 68.

29. Cf. Armstrong, *St. Augustine and Christian Platonism* for a description of the primary links and differences between the pagan Platonism of Plotinus and the Christian Platonism of Augustine. Cf. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 86 for a characterization of neo-Platonic influence on Augustine. Cf. pages 79–107 for a general discussion of the importance of neo-Platonism and philosophy to Augustine's thought. Cf. Rist, *Augustine*, 3 for a description of the Platonic texts to which Augustine was likely exposed.

30. Cf. Crouse, "Paucis Mutatis Verbis," 37–50 for a brief overview of the debate regarding the nature of Augustine's exposure to the Platonic sources that influenced his thought.

31. Augustine, *Conf.* 7.9.13.

32. Brown, *Augustine*, 90–91.

33. Torchia, "St. Augustine's Treatment of Superbia," 67.

34. Plotinus, *Ennead* I.2.3. Cf. Gerson, *Plotinus*, 199.

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

intellectual union with intellect and the One³⁵ is perhaps the closest classical view to Augustine's position in which the human person reaches the greatest height through the intellectual possession of God.

In chapter 2 I will continue to address the intellectual foundations upon which Augustine built his understanding of humility and greatness. The views of the Stoic and neo-Platonic philosophers covered in the first chapter are certainly significant to that foundation, but are eclipsed in their significance for Augustine by the influence of Christian Scripture. The role of Scripture in Augustine's thought became increasingly important as that thought matured. In his early years, Augustine had been alienated from Scripture by its style and his own pride of learning.³⁶ In the years following his conversion to Christianity, however, Augustine would turn to Scripture as the primary source and inspiration for his vast literary corpus. His dependence on sacred Scripture is manifest not only in his constant reference to it throughout all of his writings, but also in the series of scriptural commentaries he penned throughout his career. Beginning with a number of commentaries written in the last decade of the fourth century, Augustine became a prolific exegete after the year 400 with the writing of his final commentary on the book of Genesis and the publication of his sermons on the Psalms and the Johannine writings.³⁷ Given the importance of Augustine's use of Scripture, I will examine the manner in which he approaches the sacred text with particular emphasis on how the content of Scripture and the methods Augustine used to unlock that content affected his understanding of humility and greatness. Both Jewish and Christian Scripture plainly support the importance of humility to human greatness, and Augustine's exegetical methodology served to reinforce that support.

Following my description of Augustine's use of Scripture in support of his view concerning humility and greatness I will discuss the anthropological and moral principles Augustine draws from Scripture to sustain that view. The primary anthropological principle affecting Augustine's understanding of humility and greatness is his view of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27). This principle is critically important to the discussion, as it is in Augustine's view the highest honor to which the human person is called.³⁸ This image and likeness, how-

35. Plotinus, *Enn.* I.2.2.

36. Augustine, *Conf.* 3.5.9.

37. Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar," 543–44.

38. Augustine, *Trin.* 12.3.16.

ever, has been deformed by sin. The wound created by sin is, in Augustine's view, truly profound.³⁹ The roots of that sin are found in the disorder of pride, which Augustine conceives of as the choice of the person to pursue love of self in preference to love for God.⁴⁰ We will see that Augustine's view of pride as the foundation of sin is an important justification for his emphasis on the significance of humility as the principle opposed to self-serving love.

In chapter 3 I will present Augustine's understanding of humility within the context of the moral principles that shape his view of the principle. Augustine's moral theory borrows important elements from the eudaemonistic moral structures of his classical predecessors, yet is profoundly influenced by his reading of Scripture. In addition, his morality bears the marks of some of his most significant intellectual innovations. Augustine's understanding of knowledge, his emphasis on the importance of faith in relation to the moral life, his dynamic view of love as the key principle driving moral activity, his conceptual development of the will, the role of grace, his notion of pride, and his understanding of the end of human moral action as the intellectual possession of God are all significant developments beyond the moral thought he inherited from his Greek and Roman forerunners and each hold significant implications for Augustine's understanding of humility and greatness.

My investigation regarding the substance of Augustine's conception of humility in relation to morality will begin with an investigation of the words he uses to address the idea of humility. Following the terminological study, I will provide a description of the moral structure in which Augustine developed his understanding of humility. Augustine is well known for his understanding of the relation between grace and the moral life. It will be demonstrated that humility is a key aspect of Augustine's view regarding the necessity of grace for the human person's ability to choose the good and thus achieve perfection. Having described the specific role humility plays within the context of Augustine's moral structure, I will then treat the relation of humility with the different principles that comprise Augustine's moral thought. Augustine posits a significant function for humility in relation to faith, love, the will, virtue, and wisdom, all of which have bearing on his understanding of a person's highest calling.

39. Augustine, *Lib. Arb.* 1.11.22.

40. Augustine, *Gn. Adv. Mn.* 2.15.22.

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

Chapter 4 will examine Augustine's thought on the relationship between humility and greatness. Since Augustine views pride as the greatest impediment to greatness, I will begin by investigating Augustine's view of the manner in which humility is able to combat the vice associated with pride.⁴¹ Following the description of the relationship between pride and humility, I will provide an account regarding the importance of Jesus to Augustine's understanding of humility and greatness. Christ is the epitome of both humility and greatness for Augustine and is therefore the personification of the relationship between the two principles. Lastly, I will discuss Augustine's paradoxical presentation of the relationship between humility and greatness, which culminates in the human person's ultimate honor as the image and likeness of the triune God.⁴²

Although the theme of pride and humility is announced in the prologue of *The City of God* and runs throughout the course of that work, the relationship between the two receives its most explicit and systematic treatment in book fourteen. In chapter 4 I will provide an analysis of this text to highlight the themes Augustine presupposes and develops in relation to his understanding of humility and greatness. In addition to this textual analysis, the presentation of chapters 3 and 4 will use Augustine's sermons as the primary source from which I derive his understanding of humility and its relationship to human greatness. My focus on the sermons, based in part on Augustine's own encouragement to attend to his preaching rather than his written works,⁴³ is also based on the observations of contemporary authors who contend that Augustine's doctrinal and polemical works, although essential to understanding his thought as a whole, sometimes present only a partial view of that thought in their mission to argue a particular point of view. His pastoral writings, in their view, often present a more balanced and fuller articulation of doctrinal matters.⁴⁴ This is particularly the case for the presentation of humility and greatness in Augustine's sermons, which is both insightful and extensive.

More importantly for the purposes of my study, Augustine's sermons are focused upon the ideas of humility and greatness for three separate but related reasons and are thus particularly suited to be the primary source for a study on the topic. From a pastoral perspective, humility is critical to

41. Augustine, *En. Ps.* 58 (2).5 (WSA III/17:171).

42. Augustine, *Trin.* 12.3.16.

43. Augustine, *Cat. Rud.* 15.23.

44. Drobner, "Studying Augustine," 19–20.

the relationship of the individual believer with his or her God. Since the purpose of Augustine's sermons is to draw the members of his flock closer to God, he often highlights the importance of humility in that process.⁴⁵ The relation of humility to greatness is also important as an encouragement for the believer to embrace the humility that will lead to an enriched relationship with God. The second reason the sermons are a fruitful source for Augustine's view on humility is their Christological focus. Augustine's emphasis in his sermons on Christ has been characterized as the most pronounced of any Patristic author.⁴⁶ Since Christ is, for Augustine, the preeminent example of both humility and greatness, his presentation in the sermons often addresses these aspects of Christ's mission and person. Lastly, Augustine's sermons are frequently, if not predominantly, concerned with elaborating the passages of Scripture, which often address the idea of humility and its relation to exaltation. As a result, Augustine takes up many scriptural themes concerning humility and greatness throughout his preaching. In addition to the central role of the sermons, I will also make significant use of his doctrinal treatises to describe the moral context in which Augustine addresses humility and greatness. I will also use them where they are helpful to articulate the arguments concerning humility and greatness presented by the sermons.

In chapter 5, I will address the thought of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche as the most influential modern philosophers to write about humility and human excellence. In the presentation of his moral thought, David Hume takes the unprecedented step of applying the experimental method of Francis Bacon to the study of human nature, using that methodology as the criteria through which he evaluates morality.⁴⁷ The cautious and meticulous observation called for by this method is applied by Hume to the observation of human behavior, which would serve as the foundation of his approach to morality. This method, combined with the influence of seventeenth-century skepticism, serves to detach Hume's thought from that of his ancient and medieval predecessors. In that context, Hume replaces the rationalist approach to morality that dominated the thought of medievalists and ancients alike with a sentimentalist approach that focuses

45. Cf. Augustine, *Doc. Chr.* 4.4.6 for a sample text of his view regarding his role as preacher. Cf. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 159–60, who characterizes Augustine's view of a catechist's role as only providing a spur through which audience members might embrace the love of Christ, the sole remedy capable of overcoming human pride.

46. Doyle, "Introduction to Augustine's Preaching," 13.

47. Norton, "An Introduction to Hume's Thought," 4.

THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY

on moral feeling and emotion as the criteria distinguishing good from bad action.⁴⁸ We will see that the focus on moral feeling has a direct impact on Hume's view of humility, which he characterizes as bad due to the negative emotions it arouses.⁴⁹ Hume's rejection of the relationship between religion and morality⁵⁰ (which again distinguishes him from classical philosophers who did not generally exclude the divine from their moral deliberations), the ethically normative role played by the views of society in his thought,⁵¹ and his understanding of utility as the principle determining the moral value of social virtue and vice⁵² all serve to shape his view of humility and human greatness in a markedly different way than that of Augustine.

Following Hume, I will introduce the aspects of Friedrich Nietzsche's thought that bear on the relationship between humility and greatness. One could characterize much of Nietzsche's moral thought as a reflection on the meaning of human greatness. There are no counterintuitive or paradoxical arguments in Nietzsche's understanding of that greatness, however. The human person's drive to express power is the principle that guides the moral thought of Nietzsche⁵³ and is the ultimate foundation of his view concerning human excellence. Nietzsche's will to power is expressed throughout his moral theory, which proposes an irrational view of the virtues⁵⁴ and is noted for the construct of a master and slave morality based on Nietzsche's critique of both Jewish and Christian moral thought.⁵⁵ Nietzsche's notions of irrational virtue and master and slave morality both contribute to his view of human greatness and his repudiation of humility as having any positive value in its regard. A last aspect of Nietzsche's thought with significant impact on his understanding of humility and greatness is his famous proclamation of the death of God.⁵⁶ Nietzsche contends that it is only with the removal of God that the human person can reach his or her greatest

48. MacIntyre, *Short History of Ethics*, 169.

49. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* 2.1.5.

50. Cf. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* 9.1.1 for a sample text articulating Hume's opposition to the use of religious thought as a source to derive moral principles.

51. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* 5.2.42.

52. *Ibid.*, 5.1.4.

53. Nietzsche, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 318.

54. Hunt, *Origin of Virtue*, 81.

55. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 1.7, 1.10.

56. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 5.343.

destiny. Simply stated, the Nietzschean view of humility and greatness is in radical opposition to that of Augustine.

In the final chapter, I will present a closing analysis in which I assess the most significant differences between approaches to human greatness that include humility and those that exclude it. I will begin that analysis with the most obvious difference between the modern thinkers and Augustine, which is their atheistic approach to morality as opposed to Augustine's decidedly theistic approach. An initial examination of the debate might conclude that this division is an insuperable barrier to a meaningful comparison between the thought of Hume and Nietzsche on the one hand and that of Augustine on the other. While the relation of God to the understanding of humility is obviously of great importance, opposing perspectives on the view of this relationship do not completely preclude meaningful comparisons between these authors. Such comparisons, if not made on the basis of a person's understanding of God, can still be articulated through other shared principles of moral discourse. One might counter that authors such as Augustine and Nietzsche have so little in common, comparisons on the basis of shared principles would be meager indeed. Yet despite their great differences, there are a number of contexts in which Hume and even Nietzsche may be compared with Augustine.

Following the discussion regarding theistic and atheistic approaches to humility and greatness, I will offer a reflection on the compatibility, or lack thereof, between Aristotle's understanding of magnanimity and Augustine's view of humble greatness. The reflection will first note the parallels between magnanimity and humble greatness and will then focus on the significant differences between the two concepts. In a second analysis I will provide a comparison between Augustine and the modern authors of the study regarding their varying conceptions of humility and greatness. Beginning with Hume's account of human excellence and then moving to that of Nietzsche and Augustine, the analysis will draw out the implications of each author's moral principles for the elaboration of their view of greatness and will subsequently comment on how well each conception depicts that greatness. The study will then conclude with a final reflection on Augustine's unique contribution to the understanding of humility and its importance to the heights of human excellence.