Foreword

by C. C. Pecknold

Saint Augustine begins his most extensive, detailed argument with ancient Roman culture by confessing that he knows "how great is the effort needed to convince the proud of the power and excellence of humility, an excellence which makes it soar above all the summits of this world, which sway in their temporal instability, overtopping them all with an eminence not arrogated by human pride, but granted by divine grace." (*City of God* I.Preface)

It is not that humility is unknown to Romans. It is that it is not really admired. To Roman ears, humility is weakness and pride is strength. To suggest that humility is an "excellence," a *virtus*, a virtue which raises up the human person is indeed an arduous task. But it is a task Augustine alone rises to accomplish in the *City of God.* By his own acquired skills of argumentation, and also by an act of faith, trusting that God's own descent into the economy of the flesh—the Word of God taking on the "form of a servant" even unto the point of death on a Roman cross—Augustine demonstrates that the best argument of all is the person of Jesus Christ, whose descent into a humiliating death brings about resurrection and glorious ascent to the right hand of the Father. (Phil 2:5–11)

Elsewhere, Saint Augustine says that humility is the first rung on the ladder of perfection, and in his argument with pagan moral philosophy, demonstrates why humility, not pride, leads to happiness. Following Augustine, a whole host of thinkers in the West will follow this argument with methodological variation. Saint Benedict has twelve degrees of humility, and Saint Anselm has seven. Medieval universities often had gates of humility through which all matriculating students passed. Humility is

at the heart of the whole idea of apprenticeship to masters, of communal formation, of *manuduction*, of obedience to an extrinsic, transcendent end, and it becomes crucial for a Christian understanding of friendship (raising up Aristotle's view of friendship). Humility is not the form of all the virtues—that is reserved for *caritas*—but *humilitas* is necessary to receive all the theological virtues, to be receptive to the divine action which can heal and elevate the human person. It is the virtue required for Christian formation – as Chesterton once wrote, humility makes firm the feet which may grip the ground like trees.

Augustine's method can be seen simply in the preface to the *City of God* already referenced. It is a method of finding analogical footholds in those sources that Rome does admire, and showing why it is not unreasonable to think differently about humility than they do. For example, he cites a line from Virgil's *Aeneid*, "To spare the conquered, and beat down the proud," because he finds in it a faint echo of what has been revealed to Christians: "God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble." (James 4.6) If so great a Roman poet as Virgil could recognize that "pride goeth before a fall" in terms of battle, then Augustine saw they had at least a shadowy resemblance in their own literature which could help them to understand why pride might be more problematic than they think, and humility more worthy of praise.

Joseph McInerney has followed a similar method throughout *The Greatness of Humility*—but he has significantly extended its reach into the modern era. In the first half of this book, McInerney presents one of the most concise and elegant overviews of why the virtue of humility should be understood as central to the entire Augustinian corpus. He begins with the same classical sources that Augustine responds to in order to teach us the nature of his task, and then he shows us precisely why humility is the royal road, not only to the good life, but to eternal glory, to being made partakers of God. Yet in a stunning second movement, McInerney turns to our own cultured despisers of humility—those thinkers who, once again, find it difficult to believe that humility is a virtue at all.

David Hume famously derided humility as one of the "monkish virtues." He loathed celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, silence, solitude, and the chief virtue required for them all: humility. All of these were meaningless pursuits, and the virtue required of them all could not be considered a virtue because it did not lead a person to fortune, or to social prestige, or proper employment. Humility is bad for the profit motive. Hume never once considers that mastery of the world might not be

the chief end of "dependent rational animals" (to borrow a phrase from Alasdair MacIntyre, whose influence on the present work is noteworthy and admirable). Hume never pauses to reflect on the humility required to learn from others, a form of dependence that Hume himself must have experienced, but did not properly acknowledge. To be fair, Hume did think modesty – allied with the virtue of temperance –might be a way of evoking sympathy in others, and thus serve some "social function." But isn't this the kind of "sentimental humility" we might rightly distrust as weak, ineffectual, and that usually irks us as disingenuous?

Nietzsche is more consistent, and his rejection of humility more total. For him, humility is just at the heart of "slave morality." The compassion of Christianity makes people into slaves of the powerful. Nietzsche thinks this slave morality is unnatural. Such "monkish virtues" undermine the raw, natural power of our will to dominate. It is precisely the *libido dominandi* that Augustine wants us to reject that Nietzsche thinks we should embrace. Humility is a pathetic tactic of the weak, whose resentment of the strong has led them to a "re-valuation of all values." In Nietzsche's view, Christian humility has led us astray from what is truly alive and good: our noble powers of mastery. Nietzsche advocates the overthrow of humility precisely to restore things to their natural order, wherein masters are considered good and noble, and slaves weak and sickly. In the line which runs from Hume to Nietzsche, we can see that humility is not always considered a virtue anymore – indeed, it has been considered a vice. Nietzsche understood that humility was ordered to compassion and divine charity, neither of which he thought were natural. At least we can commend Nietzsche for knowing that in rejecting Christianity, he was rejecting charity itself.

Based on these atheistic treatments of humility, one might wonder if Augustine's path has been unraveling in the West. How will it turn out? McInerney follows Augustine's path anew, however, to show us the greatness of humility once again. He finds many new analogical footholds in today's cultured despisers, and admirably accomplishes a similar task of convincing the proud of the greatness of humility. It is still an arduous task, but McInerney shows us that it is a task which remains situated in the heart of Western civilization – the virtue of humility contains the essential seeds for the renewal of the mind and conformation of the soul to the image of Christ.

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