

**Joseph J. McInerney.** *The Greatness of Humility: St. Augustine on Moral Excellence.* Pickwick Publications 2016. 208 pp. \$26.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781498218160).

Bathed in greatness, Augustine desperately needed humility. He needed humility to hold him in check because the line separating his so-called enemy, pride, and the so-called elixir, humility, was more feeble and faded than perhaps he would admit. He attacked pride, therefore, vociferously, almost proudly. Mankind was nearly interred in original sin and only one lifeline was provided: Jesus. In God becoming man, the infinite revealed humility *par excellence*. For the great Augustine, we must shed any clinging to individual greatness. The greatness of Christ is in his humility, and if human beings seek to be truly great, we have to model such humility as a means to seek and find God through the grace of God. So-called great actions are as nothing without God. No individuals are great in themselves; only God is truly great. Nothing truly good can be autonomously earned and achieved: sinners are we all.

While greatness as a slogan has been co-opted by a US president clearly in need of humility, the greatness of humility is a topic also needing nuance and critique. In Joseph J. McInerney's *The Greatness of Humility: St. Augustine on Moral Excellence*, we have a staunch defender of Augustinian humility, but in a reviewer already partial to humility's value, a number of questions and some discomfort still remain. The book is structured into six main chapters. The first chapter gives an overview of the classical views on greatness and humility, with the verdict that in antiquity, their relationship was flimsy to non-existent, at best. Helpful overviews are given of Aristotelian, Stoic, and neo-Platonic thought on humility and greatness, the latter two particularly important in the context of Augustine. Fittingly, there are extended discussions of Aristotle's praise of *megalopsychia* (often translated magnanimity) which would seem to be starkly opposed to the Christian virtue of humility (though Aquinas did his best to find some coherence between them). The second chapter presents theological foundations for Augustine's interpretations of humility and greatness. McInerney highlights key biblical passages for Augustine, especially the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. He also presents Augustine's theological anthropology, which sees humankind made in the image and likeness of God and so bearing dignity, but then nearly cut off because of original sin. Pride, deemed the source of sin, can be conquered, but only the grace of God and the salvific act of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection can be the salve. Humility is a cornerstone of this saving.

In chapter three, we receive a related and extended presentation of humility in the moral thought of Augustine, followed in chapter four by a more focused description of Augustine's views of humility and human greatness. To be clear, humility plays a starring and preeminent role in Augustine's corpus and thought, and McInerney thus has an arsenal of quotations from Augustine lauding humility. In one apt instance (from the final chapter), where Augustine is explaining to Dioscurus how to submit himself to God, Augustine writes: 'In that way, the first part is humility; the second, humility; the third humility: and this I would continue to repeat as often as you might ask direction' (187). Such humility, as McInerney writes, is especially tied with love—love of God and corresponding love of our fellow human beings and creation. In general, McInerney only presents Augustine's views and offers no critique until some brief moments in the conclusion where they are raised as possibilities. But many moments, presumably needing some explanation or context, are not provided. For example, he summarizes Augustine's interpretation of the story of the Canaanite woman—a version about which feminist and postcolonial thinkers have had much illuminating insight—but such views are nowhere present in this work. And thus we read: 'Jesus acknowledges the faith of the Canaanite woman and praises the strength of that faith on the basis of

the radical humility she demonstrates in accepting her lower status relative to the children of Israel' (75). Showing a deafness to supersessionist claims, a dangerous tendency in our Post-Holocaust (and now Trumpian) age, we read of the 'fruits' of 'Augustine's figurative interpretation of Scripture,' though the example given is how the Old Covenant of David is replaced 'in favour of Christ and the New Covenant' (47). More problematically, he then follows Augustine's rebuke of 'Jews of the Bible (who) believe that they can fulfil the Law's dictates through their own efforts' (106). Such a dangerous dichotomy sets up the prideful Jews versus some humble Gentiles. Again, there is no comment here or mention of such blind spots in the Conclusion. While a work like *Augustine and the Jews* humbly raises Augustine higher than many of his fellow anti-Jew fathers of the Church, he is no Philo-Semite. McInerney unhelpfully writes: 'the view that the human person could fulfil the Law without grace was a grave error of pride for Augustine' (106). We know this and especially of his battle with the Pelagians, but for a work published in 2016, there also needs to be some comment on the current relationship of Jews and Christians and a distancing of any notion of Jews being replaced or predominantly linked with pride. A lesser (but still significant) concern is Augustine's troubled views of the body and sexuality. While he may have overcome his Manichaean period, the bar is set really low in this regard, and one struggles to find a healthy, holistic and extended presentation of the holiness of the body and of sex in Augustine's thought. This, too, would seem to be an area in need of comment in light of Augustine's link of pride and sexual and bodily lust, but no comments are forthcoming.

Chapter four examines the ideas of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche on humility and greatness, with the aim of highlighting two famous, modern views. Again, there are no extended turns to feminist thought, liberation theology, or postcolonial thought which would rightly highlight where a healthy pride (as opposed to an excessive one) may be the stronger antidote for some marginalized people—like the Canaanite woman. We do not hear how humility may inadvertently reinforce inferior and low status to the already humbled. Following his approach from earlier chapters, McInerney just presents the key ideas of Hume and Nietzsche—and though his own loyalties are clear—does not provide any critiques in the chapter. Hume ultimately sees humility as a monkish virtue, of little value in society and one that will not garner any respect, honor, or praise. Humility, in his estimation, is closer to a vice than a virtue, with pride (in relation to pleasure and pain) playing a foundational role for Hume's sense of greatness. Although Hume's final verdict on God's existence may be deist at best, Nietzsche's staunch atheism provides a further divide with Augustinian humility. For Nietzsche, the humble are the crafters of slave morality, trying to emasculate the potent and virile with terms like equality and pity, sustained by resentment. The higher man or *Übermensch* has no reason to feel or show humility but must strive to create and refashion the world in his own image and likeness. Positively, McInerney asks whether Hume and Nietzsche could provide 'long-needed corrections to the one-sided Augustinian and Christian tradition that held humility and its relation to greatness in close regard' (150). In this enticing but problematic question, contemporary scholarship and movements like feminist theology are again silenced.

In the final, evaluative chapter, McInerney employs Alasdair MacIntyre's approach on comparing disparate moral traditions to assess how humility and greatness are interpreted across Aristotelean, Augustinian, Humean, and Nietzschean worldviews. While not new, such comparisons can still be illuminating. However, for there to be a corrective to Augustinian thought on humility, Augustine's flaws need to be named and highlighted. McInerney, though, offers no real extended presentation of such flaws, which then undermines why any possible corrections could be needed. The other problem is the salves or fixes offered: Hume, and especially Nietzsche have abundant

flaws of their own. Hanging over such a dilemma is the still undecided relationship, if any, between humility and pride. While I would side with balancing both rather than choosing one or the other, such an option is not entertained here. While such an Aristotelian mean of humility and pride could be constructed, McInerney is right to show how Aristotle's magnanimous man would not be the exemplar, which should be expected as Aristotle does not see humility as a virtue in the first place. At the crux of the book, though not addressed, is the possibility of secular humility, recently examined, for example in Julie Cooper's *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought*, or more robustly and spiritually in the works of the Dalai Lama. McInerney's justification for humility is classically Augustinian: we are sinners, but God is truly great, and by imitating Christ, whose greatness is reflected in his supreme humility, we too achieve greatness (though again, not in any Pelagian way). McInerney is right to highlight humility as a way, not an 'end in itself' (172), but there remains something too literal and uniform in his interpretation of humility and his siding with Augustine against pride. It would seem that following the precepts and teachings of Christ are what should matter—not in becoming great and thinking and using humility as a means to do so. Such calculated, almost ambitious humility seems to be closer to an unhealthy pride. Augustine's moral thought and reflections on humility are humbling and illuminating, and McInerney's focus on them is still fruitful as a key piece to begin the discussion. But much more is needed—some humbled voices need to be elevated, pride instilled in those silenced, along with Augustine's rebuke against the overly proud, especially those implying and stating how they know what it means to reach greatness, or to be great again.

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