Humility, oppression, and human flourishing: a critical appropriation of Aquinas on humility

Abbylynn H. Helgevold

University of Iowa

Copyright 2013 Abbylynn H. Helgevold

This dissertation is available at Iowa Research Online: https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/1626

Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.27f0m744

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd

Part of the Religion Commons
HUMILITY, OPPRESSION, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A CRITICAL APPROPRIATION OF AQUINAS ON HUMILITY

by

Abbylynn H. Helgevold

An Abstract
Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Religious Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Diana Fritz Cates
ABSTRACT

This dissertation advances a critical appropriation of Thomas Aquinas’s thought on the virtue of humility. Humility has received relatively little scholarly attention since early modernity, and the attention it has received has been largely negative, due to humility’s association with religiously inspired attitudes that diminish the human drive for excellence. In recent decades a small number of philosophical and religious ethicists and political theorists have argued that humility, properly understood, is indeed a virtue. However, these accounts have not paid sufficient attention to the way various forms of oppression force a shift in thinking about what humility is and why it is of value. Feminist thought illuminates the social and psychological dynamics of oppression, but it has almost completely ignored the topic of humility. Where humility has been discussed by feminists, it has generally been dismissed as supportive of patriarchy and thus destructive of women’s well-being. Humanity is in need of a new account of humility that answers to important criticisms. This dissertation offers such an account by critically appropriating Aquinas’s thought on humility. It argues that humility is crucial to the realization of relational selfhood, and it definitely promotes the common good, but only if its operations are coordinated with the exercise of courage and justice.

Abstract Approval:

Thesis Supervisor

Title and Department

Date
HUMILITY, OPPRESSION, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A CRITICAL
APPROPRIATION OF AQUINAS ON HUMILITY

by
Abbylynn H. Helgevold

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in Religious Studies in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Diana Fritz Cates
This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Abbylynn Hansen Helgevold

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Religious Studies at the May 2013 graduation.

Thesis Committee: ______________________________________________________

Diana Fritz Cates, Thesis Supervisor

________________________________________________________

Ralph Keen

________________________________________________________

Melissa Curley

________________________________________________________

Michelene Pesantubbee

________________________________________________________

Linda Bolton
To my grandmother Darline whose love for learning and asking “deep questions” is a constant source of inspiration, you are my favorite theologian
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful beyond what many words can express for my teacher, mentor, and friend Diana Cates, whose love of Aquinas and great wisdom challenged me to dive deeper and develop into the person I am today. To her I owe great thanks for pushing me when I needed to be pushed, and being compassionate and encouraging when I needed these things the most. Several other inspiring scholars deserve recognition. Their support, encouragement, and love for their subjects inspired me to ask new questions and have made a lasting impact on my own thinking and being in the world: Howard Rhodes, David Klemm, Ralph Keen, Jim Duerlinger, Diane Price-Herndl, Sine Anahita, and Nikki Bado. My colleagues and mentors from the Religious Studies graduate program have been incredible friends and community members. Without them, working through the challenges and celebrating the successes of this endeavor would have been terribly difficult. Thanks especially to: Sage Elwell, Eric Dickman, Rich McCarty, Nancy Menning, Denise Kettering, Ezra Plank, Kari Thompson, David Howlett, and Matt Wilhite.

This project would have been impossible without the tremendous amount of support I received from my dear family and friends. I am especially grateful for my spouse who has demonstrated the depth of his commitment and love by sacrificing so much in order to help me achieve my goals and who continues to amaze me with his creativity, insight, and love for his family. My children, who live in a world of constant discovery, continually remind me of the value of learning, even when it is difficult. My parents, in-laws, and the staff of Eagle’s Wings Child Care have all shared their time and love while caring for my children. Their support enabled me to write and study with peace-of-mind, knowing that my children were safe and well cared for. Many thanks to my sister who is a constant source of support and who is especially skilled at helping me to face my many inner demons and to stay sane in the middle of very trying times.
Finally, I am greatly indebted to Christine Darr, a woman whose friendship has made me a better person. I sincerely have no words capable of expressing how grateful I am for her unceasing support during this process. She has helped me through many different kinds of pain and has celebrated many joys with me. She has dedicated much of her own mental space to helping me sort through many of the problems I encountered while writing this dissertation, without our many conversations this project would have greatly suffered. I could not have managed this without her.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS........................................................................................................... vi

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter Outlines ................................................................................................................................. 11
Contributions to the Field .................................................................................................................. 16

CHAPTER ONE: WHY VALUE HUMILITY? .................................................................................. 19

The Social and Civic Value of Humility ......................................................................................... 20
The Personal Value of Humility ....................................................................................................... 33
Humility and the Relational Self ...................................................................................................... 42

CHAPTER TWO: CRITIQUES OF HUMILITY ............................................................................. 56

David Hume ................................................................................................................................... 57
Benedict Spinoza ........................................................................................................................... 63
Friedrich Nietzsche .......................................................................................................................... 69
Mary Daly ....................................................................................................................................... 75

CHAPTER THREE: HUMILITY AND THE HOPE FOR EXCELLENCE (I) ....................... 86

Humility as a Potential Part of Temperance .................................................................................. 87
Humility as a Moderator of Desire ............................................................................................... 92
Humility, Pride, and Pusillanimity ............................................................................................... 96

CHAPTER FOUR: HUMILITY AND THE HOPE FOR EXCELLENCE (II) .................. 111

Magnanimity and Courage: Standing Firm in Hope ................................................................. 112
Magnanimity, Honor, and Excellence ......................................................................................... 116

CHAPTER FIVE: HUMILITY AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS .......... 128

Humility, Reverence, and Justice ............................................................................................... 128
Humility and Blind Subjection: The Problem of St. Benedict’s 12 Steps ...................... 141

CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................................. 147

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................................. 154
## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the works of Aquinas, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and citations are from the editions listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Edition Details</th>
<th>Citation Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ST</strong></td>
<td>Summa Theologica</td>
<td>Aquinas, St. Thomas</td>
<td>Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1981.</td>
<td><strong>ST</strong> Part Question. Article</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The rise of the modern era saw the demise of a once-exalted virtue: humility. As philosophers filtered what they deemed to be important for individual and social human well-being from the muddy water of superstition and irrational belief, humility was tossed out with the muck. Some of Western history’s most significant modern philosophers\(^1\) linked humility to an attitude of unworthiness and lowliness rooted in a belief in the sinfulness and powerlessness of humanity in comparison to the righteousness, perfection, and power of God.\(^2\) In essence, these philosophers considered humility to be a disposition to think of oneself as contemptible, vile, and unworthy – nothing but mere dust and ashes.

Consider Pope Leo XIII’s comments on the virtue of humility:

Do not flatter thyself that thou wilt ever be able to acquire humility, unless thou dost practice those particular exercises which are conducive to it. Acts of meekness, for instance, of patience, of obedience, of mortification, of self-hatred, of the renunciation of thine own feelings and opinions, of sorrow for thy sins, and the like. Because these are the only weapons which will destroy in thee the earth of self-love, that abominable soil which germinates all thy vices, and wherein thy pride and presumption take root and spread out in luxuriant growth.\(^3\)

Such attitudes and practices, argued the philosophers, serve to perpetuate the stagnation, if not decline, of self and society because they contribute to dispositions toward

---

\(^1\) The philosophers I have in mind are Spinoza, Hume, and Nietzsche.

\(^2\) A notable exception to this is found in Kant. In *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*, Janine Grenberg argues that Kant’s reflections on virtue show humility to be an essential virtue for acquiring the moral disposition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005). This element of Kant’s thought has not received the attention it deserves. In part, this is because the critiques of humility in modernity were so effective in rendering humility a vice that this aspect of Kant’s thought was overlooked, and also because of the overall lack of attention paid to Kant’s theory of virtue. It is important to note, however that Kant understood himself to be ridding virtues such as humility of the unreasonable presumptions of traditional, organized religion.

subservience, uncritical obedience, docility and the like. These dispositions keep people trapped under the authority of others and unable to exercise authority over their own lives. Unfortunately, under the weight of this modern philosophical critique, humility all but disappeared from sustained philosophical reflection, even in the realm of religious ethics. ⁴

Properly conceived, ⁵ however, humility shines as the virtue responsible for enabling one to understand one’s limits and to live in a manner that reflects that understanding. That such a virtue is important becomes clear when we pause to reflect on some basic human experiences. We all live our brief lives enmeshed in a complex web of relationships. Our choices influence others’ lives, and their choices influence ours. We rely on others to help us make our most important decisions and we hope others will value our perspective when making their own, morally significant decisions. To live well in the context of these relationships requires humility. Because we are by nature limited, all of us will, at one point or another (or, more likely, at many points), encounter situations that require us to recognize our limitations and be receptive to the insight of others. A failure to recognize our limits can have unfortunate consequences. We have all likely experienced the pain associated with an unwise choice we have made and the regret that accompanies a situation that might have been otherwise. We may have experienced intimately the consequences of another person’s stubborn refusal to ask for

---

⁴ A possible reason for this may be the overall drop in philosophical attention to virtue and/or character-centered ethical reflection in favor of act-centered deontological and consequentialist theories in philosophical and religious ethics. The return to virtue in ethics in the west did not occur until well into the 20th century. For more information on this perspective and those who claim otherwise see: G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy” Philosophy 33, 1958; Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame: UND Press, 1984); and Jeffrey Stout, Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001).

⁵ As the final chapters of the dissertation will elaborate, I find Thomas Aquinas’ conception of humility to be incredibly valuable as a resource for thinking about what “properly conceived” humility looks like.
or accept help from others or admit to his or her vulnerability in any way. Reaching and admitting to our limitations can be a painful experience, particularly in a culture such as in the United States which values individual autonomy and praises those who appear to have excelled all on their own. But failing to recognize our limits can prove devastating. Humility disposes us to be aware of our limitations and weaknesses. It helps us to acknowledge our vulnerability so that we are more comfortable with and less pained by it. The quality of our lives is greatly diminished if we fail properly to understand and cultivate this virtue.

Humility encourages us to be open to seeking and receiving assistance and insight from others as we strive to live well. Over the past several decades there has been a great deal of philosophical reflection on the constitutive relationality of human beings. This reflection emerged as part of a critique of overly-individualistic views of the self that were part of the same streams of Western philosophy that were responsible for humility’s disappearance from the realm of the virtues. As we come to a greater appreciation of the

---

6 I do not intend to suggest here that this is the only culture found in the United States, but that the culture of self-reliance is a prevalent and dominant one. Because of this dominant cultural approbation of apparent self-reliance and self-sufficiency there exists a cultural ethos in which our concepts of human excellence and greatness are intimately tied to individualistic (as opposed to relational) ideals.

7 A recent mini-lecture published on the “ted-talks” website by Brene Brown, a social work researcher, suggests that the very key to human happiness lies in our ability to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and to accept our vulnerability and weaknesses. Such a state of being would be impossible without the virtue of humility. See: http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html


9 Although I recognize that the concept of “relational identity” is a broad one that can be found in diverse philosophical perspectives, I am most familiar with feminist and communitarian accounts of relational selfhood in their various forms. As elaborated in Ch.1, I have used these accounts to organize my own thinking about what it means to be a relational self.
many dimensions of our relationality it is important, at least in the arena of virtue ethics, to explore the ways that certain virtues contribute to the flourishing of the relational self. That we are relational selves means, in part, that we are limited in important ways and dependent on each other. As a virtue that helps us to live well in recognition of this fact, humility ought not to be overlooked.

Of the few recent scholarly attempts to revive interest in the virtue of humility, most have been concerned primarily to disassociate the virtue of humility from what they believe to be vicious forms of self-loathing and unreasonably low self-regard.10 The above picture painted of humility by Pope Leo XIII does not accurately capture the virtue of humility, according to these thinkers. Humility is not at odds with self-respect, self-love, and a healthy degree of pride regarding one’s achievements and strengths. The major concern, according to most of these recent perspectives is to show that humility requires an accurate self-assessment rather than a necessarily low one; this means that even a truly great and accomplished person11 can also be a humble person without having to sell him or herself short. Once humility is cleared from its unfortunate and unhelpful association with excessively low self-regard it can once again be lauded as an admirable moral virtue. Humility can be understood to be the virtue by which we lower our self-regard in such a way as to ensure that we avoid developing an exaggerated sense of our own value, but we do not lower it so much that we go beyond a realistic self-assessment.

10 A detailed exploration of their points of view can be found in Chapter 1. For reference information see Ch. 1 and the Bibliography.

11 Contemporary authors use a range of examples of such persons. They range from excellent athletes like Michael Jordan, to highly virtuous and upstanding individuals, to highly regarded spiritual figures such as the Dalai Lama. Most accounts of humility do not go to great lengths to distinguish between different forms of excellence in their analyses. This may be because they are mostly concerned to show that humility does not require one to disregard the presence of real and genuine excellence (of varying forms) in the formation of an accurate self-assessment.
The primary barrier to a “realistic” self-assessment, within a 21st century American context, would seem to be the ubiquitous tendency to over-estimate self-worth and to exaggerate our individual self-importance. However, given the prevalence of various forms of oppression, such as sexism and racism, another significant barrier to the cultivation of proper humility (understood as based on an accurate self-assessment) is the tendency to underestimate considerably one’s self-worth. Under conditions of oppression, involving group prejudice and long-term structural injustice, it can be incredibly difficult to develop an accurate sense of one’s true value and worth. A thorough account of humility will take this problem seriously. There is something troubling about recommending humility to those who are “humble” not by choice, but by circumstance, especially when those circumstances are unjust. A compelling account of humility must consider that the relationships in which we live are often complicated by dynamics of unequal and unfair power distribution.

Conditions of oppression make it difficult for many individuals to thrive and to actualize their potential. In large part, what makes oppression unjust is the way in which oppressed groups and their members are systematically limited in their ability to exercise a full range of human capabilities, due to factors that ought to have no bearing on their ability to flourish or their access to the goods necessary for flourishing. Under conditions of oppression, people suffer unfair limitations in their abilities to enjoy the sorts of lives they would reasonably choose for themselves. They suffer by means of “internalized oppression” when they unwittingly consent to harmful and hurtful attitudes and actions;

---

12 The concept of relational selfhood suggests that, in large part, developing an accurate sense of one’s own worth and value as a human being and as a distinctive person requires having that value affirmed and identified by at least one other person or reality, such as the divine.

13 The use of scare quotes here is to signal that this way of using the term humble is meant to signify something quite different from what is meant in referring to being humble as being an expression of virtue. In this case I intend to use “humble” in the descriptive sense as referring to those who are rendered somehow insignificant or who have little voice or power.
and they suffer further by reacting to these attitudes and actions in ways that prove to be self-destructive. The alleviation of this kind of suffering is a worthwhile goal. It is a matter of justice, compassion, and care – for the well-being of those with whom we live in community and for the well-being of our broader societies. In order fully to grasp humility’s distinctive contribution to human flourishing, it is therefore important not only to discuss, negatively, why humility does not necessarily contribute to the maintenance of oppression, but also to examine the positive, or liberative, potential of the virtue of humility.

In particular, it is worth emphasizing, first, that one of the most important reasons people have for disassociating humility from an intentional attitude of worthlessness and lack of self-regard is that such associations can be particularly harmful for the oppressed. For the person who suffers from an inappropriate sense of her own worth, as shown, for example, by her endless sacrifice of her own interests to those around her to the point where she fails to pursue and reflectively enjoy her own good, humility as a re-affirmation of her own lowliness could be devastating.14 Misperceptions about humility may be more damaging for some people than for others. It may be valuable to sort out the degree to which those who possess or who have achieved a variety of forms of excellence among us can honestly cultivate humility, but we fail to do justice to the good in humility if we do not also clarify the ways that humility, when functioning properly, will not contribute to the unjust suffering of the oppressed.

Second, we must attend to the problem of “false-consciousness”15 that prevents people from forming a sense of their genuine self-worth. Clarifying that humility requires one to have an “accurate” rather than an unduly “low” self-estimate may not be enough.

14 A distorted understanding of humility in this case could also come in the form of a person failing to value appropriately the kind of caring work that she does.

15 This problem is defined and explored further in Ch. 1.
It is possible that an “accurate” self-assessment, made on the basis of hegemonic value systems and as determined by more privileged persons, may still be, objectively, too low. In this case, what appears to be genuine humility may still contribute to a person’s failure to pursue her own flourishing, or to strive to establish conditions that would make such a pursuit possible. A careful account of humility will take into consideration the fact that various social forces contribute to the inability of certain people to develop appropriate senses of their own self-worth.

Finally, such an account will also recognize that the most promising approach to the revival of humility is one that shows how humility can make a valuable contribution to the liberatory goal of altering those social forces.16 Dismantling oppressive structures and replacing them with just ones requires engaging in well-considered and patiently-maintained cooperative action. It requires rebuilding community around the dual values of equal human dignity and acknowledged interdependence.

As several recent authors have shown, one of the most important steps in retrieving humility lies in clarifying exactly what humility is, or how it is best defined as a distinct virtue. This step enables one to distance humility from some unhelpful and potentially dangerous mischaracterizations. As one would expect, there is not unanimous agreement on what humility, properly conceived, looks like. My aim in this dissertation is to set forth a conceptually and ethically compelling account of humility – one that not only defines humility as a distinct virtue but also shows that humility’s value can best be appreciated if we examine how it functions in relation to other virtues. When we examine humility in relation to other key virtues such as temperance, courage, and justice, we are better able to see how humility can contribute to liberatory aims.

---

16 Challenging and overcoming these social forces is an integral part of creating the kind of society in which the opportunity for genuine human flourishing is available to all.
A promising, though in some senses surprising, place to begin an exploration of humility is with the thought of Thomas Aquinas. As one of the foremost philosophers of virtue, Aquinas provides a thorough analysis of both virtue in general and of specific virtues in his *Summa Theologica*.\(^\text{17}\) He is a natural source to turn to for insight about the virtues, despite the fact that he wrote in the Middle Ages. Aquinas articulates an understanding of humility that is of great value to this project. In his effort to draw together Aristotelian and Christian thought, to articulate his vision of the moral life, Aquinas faced some difficulty when it came to the virtue of humility. For Aristotle, humility was not a virtue at all. In fact, a disposition intentionally to lower one’s self-assessment would be understood as a vice, a deficiency of the virtue of magnanimity. For Augustine, and for other authoritative Christian thinkers prior to Aquinas, humility was such a noble virtue that, like wisdom, it was thought impossible to have humility in excess. Lisa Fullam notes, “humility is something of a sticking-point in Thomas’ order of the virtues: what Christianity has regarded as one of Jesus salient virtues, Aristotle dismissed as a vice opposed to proper pride.”\(^\text{18}\) Ultimately, Aquinas argues that humility is a distinct moral virtue with its own characteristic forms of excess and deficiency. To err in terms of excess when it comes to humility is to attach one’s mind “to things beneath what is becoming to a man.”\(^\text{19}\) When one does this, as a matter of habit, one acts out the vicious disposition of pusillanimity.

At this point, even though the full meaning of Aquinas’s definition of pusillanimity has not been elucidated, it becomes evident why his account of humility


\(^\text{19}\) *ST* II-II 161.1 ad3.
might be of value for this project. There are limits beyond which humility ought not to
go, and we are right to be suspicious of any version of humility that would discourage
one from developing a sense of one’s own worth as a human being and a particular
person.20 Such a version of humility can be especially damaging to the oppressed who
consistently receive the message that they have less inherent value than their oppressors,
and the special things that they value in themselves and each other are not actually worth
valuing. If people adopt and internalize such messages they run the risk of failing to
recognize that they are generally just as capable as anyone else, given a level playing
field, of realizing remarkable human potential. Accepting an inaccurate account of
humility can lead to a failure to acquire magnanimity, the virtue by which one
consistently strives for great things.

For Aquinas, the virtues of humility and magnanimity are intimately related. They
both regulate a person’s striving, but they differ both in the way that they regulate that
striving and, as Lisa Fullam has suggested, in the motives they typically express.21
Aquinas’s understanding of humility is inexplicable without an accompanying
understanding of magnanimity. Right from the start, Aquinas invites us to examine
humility in relationship to other virtues. He provides the foundation upon which we can
begin to construct a vision of the good life that takes into account the interrelatedness of
the virtues and which clarifies the role humility plays in these relationships.

---

20 I recognize that the concern to cultivate a strong sense of one’s inherent value as a
human being is a strongly modern western concern. Thus, humility as I discuss it here, might not
be accepted as universally applicable. My hope is that I can at least offer a compelling account of
humility that is able to address the very real problems faced by those who are oppressed. These
problems must be considered in any account of humility. Even if humility is understood
differently in different cultural contexts (developed in light of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self,
for instance), it ought not to contribute to the suffering of the oppressed. In the west, a lack of a
sense of one’s own inherent dignity can be a major barrier to one’s ability to pursue a better life.

21 Fullam, *Humility*, Ch. 2. Fullam details the sometimes dizzying distinctions Aquinas
makes between these two virtues and ultimately helps to clarify these distinctions in helpful ways
that Aquinas did not fully develop.
Again, it may seem strange to turn to a pre-modern thinker who accepts as true many things that contemporary thinkers do not, particularly when it comes to the thesis that women are naturally inferior to men in their capacity to exercise reason. However, we stand to lose a great deal if we allow those elements of Aquinas’s thinking to dissuade us from exploring what else he might have to offer. Feminist author Susan DeCrane argues that we would be remiss in failing to look to Aquinas for important, albeit limited, ethical insight. She writes, “to reject classic texts leaves the human community stripped of enduring sources of human wisdom and moral insight.”

Acquiring this insight in a way that does not maintain “oppressive social and religious systems against women” requires retrieving them through a feminist critical lens. DeCrane and others have argued, and this dissertation affirms, that the retrieval of these texts is important for the development of ethical perspectives that are capable of supporting liberationist aims. Liberation for those who suffer under conditions of life-diminishing oppression is a primary aim; a critical retrieval of historically significant ethical insight makes a valuable contribution to that aim.

Feminist theologians and theological ethicists such as DeCrane share a concern for the welfare of women and an interest in identifying religiously inspired ethical perspectives that will be able to promote women’s well-being. They differ from most secular, and academically more mainstream, feminist thinkers; they take seriously religion as a potential source of insight regarding how to define and actually achieve

---


23 Ibid, xiii.

improved conditions for women. In addition to working with religious traditions, sources, beliefs, and practices these feminist thinkers draw from the insights provided by mainstream feminist thought. It is unfortunate that the reverse is not also true. Mainstream feminist thought,\textsuperscript{25} DeCrane and others argue, could benefit from considering theologically-informed perspectives.\textsuperscript{26}

Aquinas’s reflections on the virtue of humility and his insight into the interrelatedness of the virtues has a lot to offer anyone, even “secular” feminists, interested in thinking about the way that various dispositions of thinking, feeling, and acting can either contribute to or detract from one’s ability to flourish, and the way that conditions of oppression can influence those dispositions. There has been a surge in feminist reflection during the past few decades on the concept of relational identity. As feminist thinkers have become increasingly drawn to understandings of the human self as characterized by profound interrelatedness and interdependency, it is important to think about what it means to flourish as such a self. Correctly understood, humility makes an important contribution to the flourishing of the relational self and can be seen as a liberatory virtue, particularly when it operates in relationship to other important virtues.

Chapter Outlines

Chapters one and two clarify what must be included in a compelling contemporary account of humility, particularly when one brings to one’s awareness the reality of oppression and injustice and a commitment to undermine both of them, while actively improving the conditions of life for as many humans as possible. Chapter one provides a literature review of recent philosophical and religious-ethical reflection on

\textsuperscript{25} At least, mainstream feminist thought in the United States, it does seem that European feminist thinkers are more comfortable dealing with religious themes and ideas than their northern American counterparts.

\textsuperscript{26} This perspective is particularly evident in DeCrane, Parsons, and Traina. See n.25.
humility. It explores the distinctive contributions that humility can make to human well-being. Generally speaking, humility is the virtue responsible for regulating one’s desires so that they are in line with an accurate conception of who one is in relation to others, and an appropriate experience of one’s value, as a human being and as a particular individual. Human beings thrive, or fail to thrive, in the context of multiple relationships. Humility is particularly suited to create in individuals a disposition of openness and readiness to learn, even as they recognize and strengthen their ability to instruct and aid others in turn. A humble disposition is critical for making the most of the relationships in which we are located and is essential if we are to work toward making those relationships more productive of individual and social well-being. An individual’s misguided self-perception and misguided desires can greatly affect her ability to do well as a person and also contribute to the common good. Distorted perceptions and desires can cause her to close off prematurely the deliberative process that is the crux of her ability to make good choices for her life. These distortions can cause her to devalue insight and assistance from others.

When human well-being is understood in the context of liberation and oppression, being liberated from the unjustly limiting power of oppression becomes a necessary condition of genuine well-being. Overcoming and challenging oppression requires the ability and willingness to conceive of new possibilities. Chapter one calls attention to one of the most interesting things about the virtue of humility – the way that its proper cultivation can expose greater possibilities precisely by calling attention to limits.

Whereas chapter one brings to light the positive contribution that humility can make to the flourishing of relational selves, chapter two begins with an exploration of several historically significant, and still relevant, critiques of humility. The critiques offered by Spinoza, Hume, and Nietzsche, in particular, encourage us to ask deeper questions about humility and its relationship to human flourishing: Hume urges us to consider the degree to which humility can be understood as being useful or agreeable for
human beings; Spinoza brings to our awareness the relationship between humility and the experience of pain; and Nietzsche challenges us to think about humility’s relationship to power and self-interest. In addition to these historical critiques, chapter two presents a feminist critique of humility. Of the available contemporary literature on humility, there is no sustained reflection on the issue of gender and gender oppression in relation to this virtue. However, the virtue-ethical perspective of radical feminist thinker Mary Daly, can contribute to the development of a distinctively feminist critique of the virtue of humility that sheds light on the concerns of those who deal with gender oppression. Such a critique is necessary if we are to develop a satisfying account of humility.

The accurate self-perception that is necessary for developing the virtue of humility is not as easy to attain as it might seem. If an individual cannot distinguish between limits that are natural to him, or self-imposed, and limits that are unjustly imposed by others, he runs the risk of not challenging injustice and therefore contributing unwittingly, not only to his own suffering, but also to the suffering of others.27 Furthermore, the cultivation of humility runs the risk of diminishing the ability to make important choices or to be decisive; an accurate self-perception could lead to a paralyzing acceptance of one’s limitations where one is constantly prolonging deliberation by seeking more and more input and assistance. Lastly, the benefits associated with humility might appear to be genuine benefits, but only for those people who already have the upper hand in our webs of relation. To argue that those who suffer under conditions of oppression ought to cultivate humility could be a case of adding insult to injury.

---

27 For example, the student struggling with math may be convinced that he simply is not smart enough, or does not have a natural intellectual ability to master certain mathematical concepts. His trouble with math may not have much to do with his natural intellectual capabilities, however. If the quality of education he receives is negatively impacted by institutional forms of classism and racism and he is not on equal footing with privileged members of society regarding education, he may never know what he is truly capable of learning. Such educational disadvantages then lead to fewer opportunities in the future.
Contemporary accounts of humility fail to show how humility can contribute to rather than detract from liberatory aims. Chapter two clarifies the most significant concerns we ought to have about humility so that we are better able to make the strongest case in its favor.

Chapter three turns to a feminist-critical appropriation of Thomistic ethical thought, grounded in the conviction that this approach will address the most important concerns about humility raised in chapter two. Aquinas’ sustained reflection on the virtue of humility is illuminating for several reasons. First, he makes significant use of a well-wrought Aristotelian conception of virtue, even though he re-interprets this conception in light of a specifically Christian view of reality and of the final end of human life. Aquinas understands humility to be (in part) a virtue in the sense that it is a cultivated disposition to think, feel, and act in accordance with the mean, which is generally situated between two extremes. For now, we can think of the mean as “the right amount” or “a fitting amount” or “a well-considered, reasonable amount” that is determined by a person in light of the relevant particulars of his life and social situation. To characterize humility as a virtue, according to an Aristotelian conception of virtue, challenges accounts of humility that identify humility necessarily with harmful lack of self-regard.

A second reason to turn to Aquinas as a source for insight regarding humility is that he distinguishes between different kinds of virtue. His distinction between acquired moral virtues and those that are informed by religious truths that extend one’s understanding beyond the realm of natural reason (infused and theological virtues) indirectly encourages the development of an account of acquired humility. For centuries, humility has been understood as being inextricably linked to a particular kind of religious worldview, one which many modern thinkers saw as a threat to genuine human thriving. Although Aquinas, given his deeply Christian context, was not concerned to clarify the precise distinction between acquired and infused humility, he provides some interesting insight into the basic structure of humility, which enables contemporary interpreters to
develop an account of acquired humility for themselves. It is possible to speak of both infused and acquired virtue in ways that open the conversation about virtue to diverse people who belong to religiously pluralistic communities, such as American society.

Finally, Aquinas conceives of virtues in such a way that they could simultaneously be conceptually distinct and also operationally interdependent. As dispositions that influence a person’s thinking, feeling, and acting, virtues are bound to exist in relationship to one another. Depending on the extent to which a person has acquired certain virtues, she will perceive things differently, she will feel differently, and she will deliberate, choose, and act differently, in most of the situations in her life. Although Aquinas takes great pains to articulate an account of humility that sees it as a distinct character trait, he does so while also making clear that humility must operate in conjunction with other important virtues.

Chapters three and four deal explicitly with the connection between humility and the realization and/or pursuit of excellence. Chapter three explores the way that humility moderates desires for excellence and for those things by which we hope to achieve it. An exploration of the relationship between humility and the virtue of temperance helps to clarify what it means to conceive of humility as a moderator of a particular kind of desire. Following the exploration of humility’s relationship to temperance, Chapter three explores the vices of excess and deficiency associated with humility. In addition to pride, chapter three pays close attention to the vice of pusillanimity and makes use of recent feminist scholarship to indicate that pusillanimity is more common and detrimental than Aquinas likely imagined. This analysis allows for a clearer understanding of what it means to aim for “the mean” when it comes to moderating desires for excellence.

Aquinas claims that desires to realize excellence are complex. They involve both an element of being drawn-toward, and an element of being repelled-by, because the object in question is both attractive as a good and repulsive as something difficult to attain. According to Aquinas, experiencing these complex desires well requires a two-
fold virtue. Chapter four explores humility’s partner in virtue: magnanimity. It presents a critical analysis of Aquinas’s understanding of magnanimity as a kind of courage necessary for standing firm in one’s pursuit of excellence. It clarifies magnanimity’s relationship to honor, or the recognition of excellence that one receives from others. This distinction becomes important for understanding the nature of the relationship between humility and magnanimity insofar as magnanimity requires humility to ensure that one develops the proper relationship to honor and excellence.

Chapter five shifts the focus toward the way humility is expressed in relation to others. Virtually all accounts of humility argue that the cultivation and expression of humility will influence the way that one relates to others. Aquinas’s reflections on humility bring to light the connection between humility and an attitude of reverence that issues in a corresponding will to honor that which one reveres. According to Aquinas, reverence for God gives rise to the will to show due regard for God and for what is “of God” in others. The will to render what is due to others by virtue of who they are, as the divine or as other human beings qua human beings or as particular persons, is expressed in the virtue of justice. Examining the relationship between humility and justice highlights the complex considerations in which one must engage in determining what constitutes the appropriate way to subject oneself to various others. With this robust understanding of Aquinas’s understanding of humility in mind, the conclusion revisits issues raised in the first chapters and clarifies why this account of humility is appealing for those interested in thinking about the well-being of relational selves who live in societies complicated by the dynamics of oppression.

Contributions to the Field

This dissertation aims to contribute new knowledge to the field of religious and feminist ethics. Those readers who are interested in pursuing or developing critical retrievals of religious traditions, such as some feminist and liberationist thinkers – those who seek to identify problematic elements within a tradition while at the same time
highlighting the valuable contributions to human happiness that the tradition can make – will hopefully find this dissertation illuminating. Although some have argued that humility simply has too much traditional baggage to be made relevant for today, this dissertation claims that there is still valuable insight within the Western philosophical and religious (especially Christian) tradition regarding the way humility functions in the moral life. We may wish to challenge certain elements of this understanding, but we lose a great deal if we fail to attend to it with care. While other attempts to revive interest in this virtue have been made, this dissertation is distinctive in developing an account that addresses explicitly the impact that oppression can have on people’s thinking about – and the actual operation of – humility.

This dissertation also draws attention to a virtue that has been largely neglected by feminist thought, particularly because of its unfortunate association with attitudes of submission and with patriarchal religion, but that nonetheless can be seen as being important for women’s flourishing and for the success of feminist aims themselves. Several scholars have recently turned their attention toward challenging implicit assumptions within feminist thought regarding the nature of women’s empowerment and agency by re-examining the experiences of religiously devout women. These women’s experiences are often overlooked, ignored, or misdiagnosed. A significant number of religious women’s life experiences challenge the idea that genuine empowerment and fulfillment cannot be found by embracing virtues such as obedience, docility, humility, modesty, and the like. The exploration of a Christian conception of the life of virtue and


of the virtue of humility in particular presented in this dissertation identifies an empowering dimension of humility and can help feminist thinkers to address gaps in their thinking and arguing that leave a significant number of women unimpressed by and antagonistic toward feminism. Taking a closer look at humility can help feminist thinkers become more critically aware of their underlying assumptions and can help us expand our thinking about what it means for women to live well. Addressing these assumptions and gaps in thinking can also serve as a valuable invitation to a conversation between religious women and secular feminists that otherwise might not take place.

This dissertation also contributes to the field of virtue ethics by taking seriously the fact that contexts of oppression necessarily alter the way we think about and understand virtue, or what it means to excel as a human being. As Lisa Tessman claims in her book *Burdened Virtues*, the reality of oppression is overlooked in most philosophical reflection on virtue.\(^{30}\) Taking oppression seriously helps us to enrich our understanding of virtue and brings new and thought-provoking questions to the table.

In addition, this dissertation pays close attention to the relationships between different virtues in the moral life. It furthers our understanding of the life of virtue and challenges tendencies to view virtues in isolation from one another. Human life rarely requires only one virtue in a situation that carries moral significance. Rather, we are usually called to make difficult choices that require a number of coordinated moral excellences. Humility has an important role to play in the decision-making process, and if we are to understand that role, we need to understand how humility functions relative to our other character traits and dispositions. This dissertation draws us deeper into an understanding of the complexity of virtue and of our moral lives.

CHAPTER ONE: WHY VALUE HUMILITY?

Many people think they know vicious pride when they see it. It is expressed in those individuals who are full of themselves, over-confident in their abilities, oblivious to the help they receive from others, intoxicated by their self-perceived greatness, or so self-centered that they cannot see beyond themselves. Many people find these displays of pride offensive in others and often wish that prideful people would just be more “real,” honest, or, perhaps, humble.¹ Although people may wish for these things, it is not always clear what they have in mind when they do so. Intuitively, it seems to many people that, there is reason to value humility because there is reason to devalue at least certain forms of pride. Traditionally, the virtue responsible for curbing the vice of pride has been called humility. Unfortunately, because of the relative dearth of modern and contemporary philosophical reflection on humility it can be difficult to arrive at an understanding of the “virtue” of this virtue that goes beyond a vague sense of approbation.

Although they are few in number, some contemporary scholars have turned their attention to the task of clarifying what virtuous humility is, or how it is best conceived, and why it is of particular value. Their efforts are examined in this chapter. One of the questions we need to consider, if we are to develop a compelling account of humility, is why humility is valuable at all.² If we are to move from a vague and intuitive sense that

¹ An individual’s approval of humility in other people is often not without a good dose of irony. People may find much of value in the humility expressed by others but in many cases that may be simply because another person’s expression of humility becomes the means by which these people can shine even brighter.

² It may seem logically a bit awkward to begin with a question about value rather than one about definition. Scholarship on humility is not unanimous with regard to defining humility. Generally speaking we can think of humility as having something to do with being aware of limits, understanding oneself as part of a larger whole, recognizing the ways that one falls short of various ideals, or not being arrogant. The primary question of this chapter asks, even if there is not consensus regarding what humility is, what kinds of things are people saying about why humility ought to be valued? As the chapter progresses each thinker’s definition of humility will be addressed while keeping the focus on the question of value. Ultimately, after the development
humility is valuable to a deeper understanding of its value we must identify the reasons we have for counting humility among the virtues rather than the vices.

An exploration of recent scholarship on humility shows that there are different ways of assessing humility’s value. First, humility appears to be valuable because its cultivation leads to beneficial social consequences. It is crucial for liberal democratic societies. It plays a role in easing potentially conflictual interpersonal and broader social relationships, either by working against such negative emotions as envy and jealousy or by ensuring that we treat others in a way that shows due regard for their dignity. Second, humility is valuable in that it is a mark of a good and happy life. It can be seen as essential for the development of proper self-respect and accurate self-awareness. It is needed for the pursuit of truth and self-knowledge, and can be understood as a crucial virtue for enabling a person to continue to actualize his or her potential.

Contemporary scholarship allows us to understand some of the reasons we have for prizing humility, but it does not go far enough. Most contemporary accounts ignore the question of humility’s contribution to liberatory aims. If one is sensitive to the way that virtues function somewhat differently, depending on one’s social location, then one must attend to the way humility can serve the ends of liberation from social oppression. Feminist insight regarding the relational self and reflection on the way humility functions in the context of relational selfhood show that humility can play a key role in empowering people to stretch beyond and overcome various constraints.

The Social and Civic Value of Humility

As our societies become more diverse and globally connected, and we grapple with the problem of how best to deal with clashing perspectives and values in a pluralistic era, we cannot afford to overlook a virtue that is particularly well suited to these

of the Thomistic account of humility in the final chapters of the dissertation, we will return to these points regarding humility’s value.
conditions. In a recent article, Mark Button claims that humility is “one of the most important qualities for late-modern societies marked by ethical and political pluralism.”

Such societies need a “public ethos” of humility if they are to function well and avoid the injustice that so commonly stems from making important political decisions on the basis of the interests of only a fraction of the whole. According to Button, humility is “a cultivated sensitivity toward the incompleteness and contingency of both one’s personal moral powers and commitments, and of the particular forms, laws, and institutions that structure one’s political and social life with others.” Button suggests that without humility, citizens in diverse societies will lack the kind of openness to difference that is necessary if they are truly to learn and otherwise benefit from diversity. Citizens can choose to be civil and tolerant of difference out of a concern for stability and peace, but humility is more than a matter of “forbearance and restraint.” Within a public ethos of humility, citizens open themselves up to consider with genuine interest, the differences in their midst. In doing so, they involve themselves in “mutually enriching and transformative” experiences in which they bring a critical eye to their limited understandings in an effort to grasp the perspectives of others.

In addition to enabling rich and meaningful encounters between citizens, Button claims that humility also promises to be a valuable trait in the realm of political judgment. Button claims that humility helps to create an atmosphere in which citizens and political leaders are encouraged actively to seek out and consider the “lived

---

3 Mark Button, “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’? For and Against Humility,” Political Theory 33.6 (Dec 2005), 840-68.


5 Ibid, 841.

6 Ibid, 859.

7 Ibid, 859.
experiences and ways of knowing and seeing that characterize all those who might be affected by a particular public policy or judgment." If citizens and political leaders in diverse democratic societies cultivate humility, political judgments and policies are more likely to be fair. Button further claims that an ethos of humility will help societies to discover and deal appropriately with the fact that “contemporary practices and institutions are often complicit in their own forms of repression, silencing, exclusion, and humiliation." A political ethos of humility will make it more difficult for a society to be blind to the ways it perpetuates rather than conquers injustice. A public ethos of humility will present opportunities for a non-threatening examination and re-evaluation of even some of our most deeply entrenched beliefs and practices. In short, diversity brings with it opportunities for growth and development, but these opportunities cannot properly be seized without humility.

Button is not alone in finding significant civic and social value in the virtue of humility. Political theorist Mary Keys notes that,

---

8 Ibid, 860. At first glance, it may seem as though Button is rephrasing something like the Rawlsian “original position” which is intended to ensure the justice of laws and public policy decisions. However, Button’s view is quite different from Rawls’s in that Button emphasizes attending carefully to the diverse experiences of others, rather than focusing on how one would personally be affected if one were to end up in any of the social positions at stake. For more on the Rawlsian position see John Rawls, A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999).

9 Ibid, 860.

10 Button comes close here to discussing humility as liberatory, in so far as it helps to expose the ways that certain policies and practices contribute to oppression. In our search for a conception of humility that is liberatory, however we are looking for more than this by asking what other contributions humility can make to liberation. Button’s articulation of humility seems to reflect only the concerns of those who have the dominant and upper hand in society. As bell hooks and others remind us, those who exist on the margins of dominant society often have no choice but to be sensitive to the perspectives of the dominant society in addition to their own. Typically, it is the dominant classes that are able to function well in society being blissfully unaware of and inattentive to the perspectives and needs of others. See bell hooks, Feminist Theory, From Margin to Center (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984).
in recent decades … scholars and practitioners of politics as diverse as Mahatma Gandhi, Vaclav Havel, Michael Sandel, and George W. Bush (in one of his first presidential addresses on foreign affairs) have invoked humility as a positive social and civic value against the perceived hubris of modern scientific rationalism, religious radicalism and theoterrorism, and/or Western or American arrogance in foreign affairs.\(^1\)

Keys has joined these figures in turning her attention to articulating how humility can contribute to the common good. She draws from Aquinas in claiming that humility is a “virtue that checks and guides potentially domineering and grasping passions” and as such it is an important social and civic value.\(^2\) According to her interpretation of Aquinas, a key feature of humility is that it contributes to the common good by enabling all individuals, ordinary citizens \textit{and} political leaders, to be better subjects of various kinds.

According to Keys, humility enables individuals to subject themselves to other people so that they may be of service to them.\(^3\) Keys is concerned about the vice of pride which she associates strongly with a will to be in a position of power relative to others. Humility, as the virtue responsible for curbing pride, is important because it allows for the deliberate choice, when appropriate, to put the needs, interests, and desires of others before one’s own. This function of humility is crucial for promoting the common good because it helps our relationships with others become more peaceful and fruitful. Without humility, suggests Keys, our relationships with others risk being battles


\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Clearly, Keys’ focal point here is the problem of excessive pride and power-grabbing. She does not strive here to incorporate an awareness of the complexities of oppression as she sorts out some important distinguishing features of humility. This does not mean that her thoughts on humility have no merit. In fact, her claims about the need for a kind of virtue that helps in regulating one’s relationship to other citizens and to political authority are valuable and insightful. They simply ought to be more nuanced and attentive to the reality of oppression than she makes them here. The aim of this dissertation is to provide such a nuanced account.
of wills that are driven by prideful desires for power. Relationships that involve constant power struggles breed animosity, resentment, jealousy, and a host of other dangerous responses; they do not inspire generosity, thoughtfulness, and cooperation. According to Keys, humility allows us to let go of our desires for power and control and enables us to respect, care for, and cooperate with others.14

On a political scale, Keys claims that humility is responsible for promoting law-abidingness in citizens.15 It facilitates obedience to just laws and ordinances and renders citizens good subjects of legitimate political authority. Citizens without humility are likely to lack appropriate reverence for the system of governance that is responsible for maintaining the conditions for security and peace on which they so greatly depend. As a result, they are more likely to incite social disruption. In addition, leaders risk losing themselves in their own interests and desires for power if they lack the humility necessary for serving well those who depend on them for establishing just social conditions.

Humility gives leaders a chance to become aware of their own limitations and vices and to strive to rectify mistakes in judgment that arose from them. Aquinas makes clear, according to Keys, that humility makes a valuable contribution to our political lives by checking pride and thereby “curb[ing] a powerful motive of both tyranny and sedition and a clever defender of injustice.”16

---

14 Attention to the sense of powerlessness that often accompanies being under conditions of oppression complicates Keys’ position here. Sometimes desires for power and control are vicious, as Keys suggests. However, they can also be valuable means of affirming one’s dignity and heightening one’s self-respect. It can be dangerous to equate humility with not seeking power. Rather, humility when functioning well ought to be able to go hand-in-hand with seeking legitimate forms of power. Ultimately, Keys appears to be concerned with the pursuit of power simply for power’s sake, or for an unfair advantage, which is qualitatively different from virtuous kinds of power and control often sought by those who are oppressed.

15 Paul Weithman also draws upon Aquinas to demonstrate how pride, the vice that humility counteracts, can be understood to be a powerful motivation for a refusal to respect the authority of law. See: Paul Wiethman, “Thomistic Pride and Liberal Vice,” The Thomist 60 (1996), 241-274.

16 Keys, “Facilitator.”
Button and Keys both view humility as an important democratic civic virtue. It is responsible for creating and maintaining in individuals proper attitudes toward other people and the society in which they live. Both also understand humility to be a virtue that is developed in relation to reflection on the human condition. For Button, democratic humility arises out of an awareness of human limitation. It gives rise to a deliberate intention to attend to the perspectives and experiences of others in an effort to grow individually and as a society by becoming aware of and learning from our past mistakes and failures.\(^\text{17}\) For Keys, humility is an important civic virtue because it is able to check the powerful and pervasive vice of pride that is often a motivation for the pursuit of power that manifests itself as oppression or other forms of injustice.

There is another way to articulate humility’s social value, however. A number of contemporary thinkers view humility not as an independent virtue, grounded in an understanding of the human condition as such, but as a kind of “dependent virtue.”\(^\text{18}\) Michael Slote claims that dependent virtues are relative virtues. They require the existence of other good traits in a person to be classified as virtues. He writes, “… many virtues only count as such when they are attended by certain other virtues.”\(^\text{19}\) In other words, certain character traits are only deemed virtuous, or excellent, if certain other qualities exist. According to Slote, humility is best classified as a dependent virtue

\(^\text{17}\) It is clear here that although Button emphasizes the value of humility as a civic and social virtue he also thinks of humility as valuable for contributing to the growth and development of the individual.


\(^\text{19}\) Slote, Goods and Virtues, 61.
because “it is only in people with desirable or admirable qualities that humility shines forth as a (secular) virtue and represents an additional virtue or good trait beyond those we already recognize in a given individual.”20 Slote understands humility to be mostly about avoiding vanity. He describes humility as a character trait that becomes “more wonderful, more admirable, the more highly we regard someone’s other traits.”21 Humility is about relating admirably to one’s already admirable traits. Slote suggests that the most admirable of these traits would be other virtues, other excellences of character, which means that humility shines brightest in those with fine moral characters. Other authors suggest that humility is admirable also in those who have non-moral traits, such as excellence in playing the piano, which are socially recognized as valuable. As a dependent virtue, humility seems to be about relating well to one’s accomplishments, strengths, and achievements rather than about coming to terms with the limitations and vicissitudes associated with being human.22 Despite the fact that these thinkers seem to limit unnecessarily the range of individuals in whom humility can be said to be a virtue, their perspectives are helpful for elucidating some of the beneficial social consequences that can be expected to accompany the cultivation of humility.


21 Ibid, 62.

22 Statman, Driver, and others develop their accounts by focusing on the virtue of “modesty” rather than specifically on the virtue of “humility.” Their work is much discussed among those interested in reviving the virtue of humility. There are many reasons to include their perspectives in this dissertation. On the one hand, the choice to use the term modesty may be motivated by a desire to avoid the religious/theological baggage often associated with the term humility, and thereby render the virtue more appropriate for a modern/secular age. (This seems to be part of why Slote emphasized “secular” humility as a dependent virtue.) What is said about “modesty” is likely, in these cases also to apply to “humility.” Furthermore, according to the understanding of humility that I will develop in this dissertation, what these authors say about modesty applies to humility and can be incorporated into a broader understanding of how humility is best understood. Finally, the limited availability of scholarship directly focused on humility requires branching out to explore research on virtues that are significantly similar to it. Modesty, as these thinkers understand it, is one such virtue.
In a much discussed article entitled “The Virtues of Ignorance” Julia Driver identifies modesty as an important virtue that depends on its bearer being in a condition of ignorance regarding the value of his or her particular manifestations of excellence. Modesty, according to Driver, is a virtue that applies to people who underestimate their self-worth on account of a form of inattention. Modest people do not spend mental energy assessing the value of the traits they possess that are admired and valued by others. As a result they do not have an accurate grasp of their objective value; a modest person does not think of herself as highly as others tend to think of her, and Driver suggests that outside observers have the more accurate and objective understanding of the value of the modest person’s admirable qualities. According to typical accounts of virtue, it does not seem appropriate to classify as a virtue a trait whose relative excellence depends on ignorance however, Driver argues that modesty is such a trait.

The reason we consider modesty a virtue, according to Driver, is because the “psychological state” of being reluctant to dwell on one’s own admirable qualities has significant instrumental value. Driver claims that modesty is valuable because it leads to an alleviation of the more destructive competitive emotions like jealousy and envy. Modesty oils the wheels, so to speak. It eases interaction between

---

23 Julia Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” The Journal of Philosophy, 86, no. 7 (Jul 1989), 373-84. Driver is not specific about the kinds of excellence she has in mind.

24 Ibid, 374.

25 Driver does not make explicit how determinations of objective value are to be made. She suggests in her article that other people better able to recognize and properly evaluate traits that are objectively valuable than individuals are themselves. There are obvious problems with this, especially in situations where others fail to acknowledge one’s inherent value or the value of one’s distinctive strengths or achievements.

26 Driver does not think she is conflating the condition of ignorance with the activity of not attending to or “dwelling on” one’s admirable qualities. Instead, her claim is that a person’s uncaring attitude toward these qualities leads to her lack of awareness of the objective value of them: because the great things she does in life are not valuable to her, she fails to gain an awareness of how great these things, objectively considered, really are.
people. … The modest person fails to elicit the sort of jealousy that a nonmodest person would engender. The modest person is, therefore, less troublesome.27

The reason we value virtues such as modesty and humility, according to this view, is precisely because of the beneficial social consequences that result from their being present. Regardless of whether one accepts Driver’s claim regarding the virtue of a certain form of ignorance, Driver highlights a significant social consequence of humility, particularly in people who are highly regarded by others. Humility decreases the likelihood of various forms of hostility and unhealthy competition that threaten our ability to live well in community. There is something about people who are humble regarding their true greatness, objectively considered, that makes them non-threatening to others, and this quality has significant social value.

Norvin Richards, Daniel Statman, and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev share Driver’s view that humility is to be valued primarily in people who are particularly excellent in some noticeable respect.28 These authors are skeptical, however that character traits rooted in ignorance can be called virtues, regardless of their beneficial social consequences. Each of these authors has developed an account that enables modest or humble individuals to be fully aware and justifiably proud of their excellent qualities. Humility and modesty have significant social moral value for these thinkers because these virtues prevent people from behaving as though their superiority grants them the right to treat others with anything less than respect for their fundamental human dignity.

According to Norvin Richards, people with a humble disposition need not be ignorant of nor deliberately downplay the value of their praiseworthy accomplishments or traits.29 Humility is about keeping one’s accomplishments in proper perspective and


28 At this point it is safe to work with a broad understanding of excellence that encompasses both moral and non-moral forms of excellence.

being sure not to exaggerate them beyond what they are actually worth. Richards claims that humility ensures that people who are highly accomplished are not disposed to believe and act as though they are more important “to the universe” than other people are. In saying this, Richards is saying, in part, that it is important for people who are particularly excellent in some way to adopt a realistic, as opposed to an exaggerated, awareness of themselves and their achievements. By expanding one’s perspective, and considering how one stands relative to the rest of the universe, one can appreciate that there are limits to the special treatment one can reasonably expect to receive in recognition of one’s excellence.\(^{30}\)

According to Richards’s perspective, humility bolsters a person’s ability to respond well to a variety of common social situations. Humility keeps one from being viciously self-absorbed and believing that one “matters more, period” than others. For example, a humble person may be resentful of harsh forms of mistreatment, but she should not hang on to resentment unreasonably by believing and behaving as though the mistreatment she suffered was intrinsically more awful than that experienced by others.\(^{31}\) Because humility is the virtue that inclines one to have a realistic and non-exaggerated self-assessment, one will be better equipped to handle cases of mistreatment and to know when toleration or forgiveness are called for. According to Richards, humble individuals will also not be so self-absorbed that they fail to respond compassionately to various

\(^{30}\) Richards implies that the proper perspective from which to assess one’s value is from the perspective of the “universe.” The result of viewing from this perspective seems to be that all human beings are basically equal in their insignificance relative to the universe as a whole. This view, suggests Richards, helps one to gain an accurate understanding of the real value of one’s accomplishments, which might seem very significant according to human standards, but quite insignificant according to the broad view of the universe. He is not explicit about why this is necessarily so or why the perspective of the “universe” is the best one from which to evaluate human accomplishments.

\(^{31}\) Richards, *Humility*, ch.2.
“loud and clear” instances of suffering.³² They will, more likely, be moved to help others in need out of a recognition that, if they were a similar situation, they would desire assistance too. Richards goes on to explore the many ways that cultivating humility would influence the life of the humble person, and in so doing he explores a number of different social situations that are moderated by humility. His reflections on humility suggest that a person who adopts the realistic self-understanding that is characteristic of humility will be better able to live his life in a way that respects the equal moral worth of all persons.

Daniel Statman agrees that humility is largely about showing due respect for others, but he argues that the “realistic self-assessment” perspective endorsed by Richards does not allow truly excellent people to ascribe value to their special forms of excellence.³³ An account of humility as the disposition to think of oneself as no more important “to the universe” than others cannot make room for the fact that there are those people in society that are “superior” to others in many ways, including morally. Statman suggests that Richards’s perspective virtually erases important distinctions in value that can and ought to be made. If one is concerned about maintaining peace in the interest of securing a stable society for humanity, a wise diplomat, whose character and skill make her an excellent negotiator, is more valuable than a skilled mechanic or a friendly waitress. Statman claims that showing proper self-awareness and self-respect involves comparing one’s self with others on a number of levels and valuing those areas in which one rightly judges oneself, or others rightly judge one, to be particularly excellent. As a result of this comparison, it is appropriate, at times, to be incredibly proud of oneself. The “realistic” self-understanding promoted by Richards is still too low, according to

³² Ibid, 69.

Statman. Richards appears to be equating humility with a low self-estimate rather than an accurate one. Statman writes,

the fact that one can always be a better person in one or another respect does not rule out the possibility that one’s achievements might be truly impressive. Suppose human worth could be measured on a quantitative scale. And suppose one has gained 90 points out of 100. Why do we consider that the right perspective is to stress the ten missing points which hardly anyone has ever gained, and not the 90 which one actually gained while the human average is only 60?  

According to Statman, modesty is the virtue that disposes meritorious people “to avoid arrogance and boastfulness in spite of [their] (justified) high self-assessment, and to be careful not to interpret [their] (true) superiority as granting [them] extra, more permissive, moral rights.”  

Modesty is valuable because of the way that it helps truly great people resist the temptation to treat other human beings disrespectfully by focusing on their own accomplishments, to the neglect of the moral dignity that is shared equally by all persons. Statman explains, “the modest person keep[s] a clear distinction between his superior qualities and achievements, on the one hand, and his moral status with regard to other human beings, on the other.”  

Modesty is valuable, not for everyone, but for the rare excellent person in our midst who requires modesty to be able to “manag[e] to treat other human beings in the way he should, and indeed wants to, treat them, that is, out of compassion, justice, etc., in spite of his strong inclination to treat them otherwise,

34 Statman, “Modesty,” 427. Statman is not clear regarding which particular scale of value he is supposing in this statement. As a result it is not clear in which cases or why it would be helpful to measure human worth in this way. If he were focused on basic human dignity such evaluative measures would be offensive rather than helpful.

35 Ibid, 434. It does seem at this point that Statman’s account of modesty does not amount to much more than showing due respect for other human beings. In removing much of the baggage associated with modesty, Statman may have ended up taking away the distinctiveness of the virtue.

36 Ibid, 434.
disregarding their moral status as human beings.”\textsuperscript{37} It is important not to underestimate the significance of what modesty is able to accomplish for Statman. Modesty is directly tied to a person’s ability to act in obedience to the moral law. It is integral to the disposition to treat other human beings as “ends in themselves.”\textsuperscript{38} Although it may be an important virtue for a relatively small group of people, modesty is nonetheless highly valuable.

Aaron Ben Ze’ev develops a different understanding of modesty than Statman, but arrives at a similar conclusion regarding its influence on our relationships with others and its valuable connection to respect.\textsuperscript{39} Whereas Statman suggests that people who rightly judge themselves to be superior to others require modesty in order to deal with their strong temptation to behave in a way that disregards the equal human dignity of all, Ben Ze’ev claims that a genuinely modest person is not likely to experience such temptations at all. This is because the modest person understands that, although he may be excellent according to the standards set by one particular “evaluative framework,” there is no further standard against which to measure the value of different evaluative frameworks. A modest person’s awareness of the fundamental equal human dignity of all is more significant for him than the particular moral or nonmoral successes he achieves in his life. Ben Ze’ev claims that, for modest people, the computation of their comparative advantages and disadvantages is, “insignificant in light of the basic common nature and fate (say, death) of all human beings. This computation does not reflect the genuine worth of human beings, which is different from the sum of what is regarded in a society to be

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 435. Statman is not clear in this statement or elsewhere why or how an individual who \textit{wants} to treat other’s with respect would also have a \textit{strong inclination} to treat them otherwise.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 434.

\textsuperscript{39} Aaron Ben Ze’ev, “The Virtue of Modesty,” \textit{American Philosophical Quarterly} 30, no. 3 (Jul 1993), 235-46.
their merits and flaws….⁴⁰ For Ben-Ze’ev, modesty is especially important for maintaining respectful human relationships. A modest person can be proud of his accomplishments, but will also understand the relative nature of these accomplishments and thus will be less likely to treat others as having less dignity than himself.

As this brief exposition makes clear, a consensus on the best way to conceive of and evaluate the virtue of humility does not currently exist. A number of authors suggest that a key part of humility’s value stems from the beneficial moral and social consequences its cultivation generates. Humility can preserve an ethos of respect for human dignity, even as it allows for the recognition of diverse moral and social accomplishments. It can also facilitate more meaningful and just political activity by citizens as well as political leaders, as Button and Keys suggest. Other thinkers who have turned their attention to humility highlight the way that humility can contribute to an individual’s own flourishing.

The Personal Value of Humility

A central concern for contemporary scholars who wish to revitalize interest in the virtue of humility is the apparent conflict between humility and appropriate self-respect. As the previous section shows, several ethicists have argued that humility can co-exist with a person’s accurate and even lofty appraisal of his worth, where “worth” may refer (depending on the context) to equal human dignity, the worth associated with moral or non-moral accomplishments, and/or broader social worth or value to a particular society. Humility is the virtue that keeps a person from over estimating his self-worth in such a way that he fails to respect the dignity of others.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 237. Elsewhere in his article Ben Ze’ev appears to claim more for modesty than his “evaluative account” seems to offer. For example, he claims that modest people are “deeply concerned with the needs of others and are not preoccupied with themselves” (238). This seems to go beyond the definition of modesty that he sets out at the beginning. Articulating a response to these issues goes beyond the purposes of this chapter, however.
Working within the Kantian tradition, Janine Grenberg reminds her readers that we not only have duties to others, including the duty to respect their humanity - we also have duties to ourselves. Specifically, we have a duty to respect ourselves in the right way. Grenberg argues that a relationship of mutual dependence exists between virtuous humility and virtuous self-respect.\(^{41}\) She writes, “… while self-respect is a necessary condition for humility, humility is also a necessary condition for self-respect.”\(^{42}\)

According to Grenberg one cannot be said to have proper self-respect without an awareness of the deep limits of moral agency and one cannot be said to have an accurate awareness of these limits if one fails to respect oneself as a moral agent.\(^{43}\) Humility is an attitude by which one demonstrates proper regard for oneself as “dependent and corrupt,” while also acknowledging, in self-respect, that one is a “capable and dignified” moral agent.\(^{44}\) Humility expresses good judgment regarding the limited moral value of the self in relation to the supreme and “untrumpable value of moral principles.”\(^{45}\)

\(^{41}\) In so far as virtuous humility and virtuous self-respect go hand-in-hand for Grenberg, it is possible to view Grenberg as describing humility as a dependent virtue. For Grenberg, as opposed to previous authors, however humility does not depend on one having achieved particularly admirable moral or non-moral qualities but rather on one having due regard for one’s own humanity.


\(^{43}\) The fact that an individual recognizes that the demands of morality apply to her provides a stable basis upon which she can accept her genuine self-worth as a “capable and dignified” being. She also recognizes her “dependent and corrupt” nature in the face of her failures and her limited ability to live up to the preeminent demands of her moral principles.

\(^{44}\) Ibid, *passim*. Grenberg uses the terms “interest,” “attitude,” and “character trait” interchangeably to capture “…the internalization of value judgments into one’s character through repeated actions and value judgments, such that the judgments are expressed not only rationally but also through a regular pattern of affective expression” (160).

\(^{45}\) Ibid, 161.
Grenberg claims further that “humility is … more than just any interest or attitude among others.”\textsuperscript{46} Humility is a “meta-attitude” because it is one that is developed in response to deep and central questions about the nature and value of the self. It is appropriate to think of humility also as a “perspective” or “point of view” because “it is an attitude which constitutes the approach one brings generally to the exercise of one’s agency and that lens through which one observes one’s moral world.”\textsuperscript{47} The “meta-attitude” of humility is developed in the face of the demands of morality. It is not, as some other thinkers imply, developed in light of the inherent danger of self-other comparison.\textsuperscript{48} Rather, it is developed in light of the recognition that one is limited in one’s ability to live up to the demands of morality.

Cultivating the “meta-attitude” of humility is essential for fulfilling the additional moral duty of self-knowledge. In Grenberg’s analysis, Kant claims that moral agents have an obligation to self-knowledge, particularly moral self-knowledge. They have a duty to engage in the kind of reflection necessary to determine if they act from pure or ethical motives – if they have a good “heart.”\textsuperscript{49} This obligation involves knowing themselves to be particular manifestations of a particular kind of being, in other words, to know themselves \textit{qua} human beings (“substantial self-knowledge”), and becoming aware of the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 161.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 161.

\textsuperscript{48} Grenberg argues at length against the positions advanced by Driver, Richards, Statman, Ben Ze’ev, and others in Chapter 4 of \textit{Kant and the Ethics of Humility}. Ultimately, she claims that these positions fail to capture the value of humility because they base humility in “self-other comparison” which “inadvertently ends up affirming just what these commentators are wanting to avoid, viz., associations of humility with inferiority or, alternatively, superiority” (9). To explore the details of her arguments against authors previously mentioned would take us too far from the expressed aim of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{49} In \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, Kant calls on an agent to “know your heart – whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure” (6: 41/191). Quoted in Grenberg, \textit{Kant and the Ethics of Humility}, 225.
more idiosyncratic elements of their moral lives (“derivative self-knowledge”). The attitude of humility is directly tied to substantial self-knowledge because the former is grounded in an understanding of human nature as “dependent and corrupt.”

The obligation to have derivative self-knowledge, to acquire knowledge of “facts particular to the individual in question, including motives, character traits, and overall disposition…” is fraught with difficulty. Genuine, thoroughgoing, derivative self-knowledge is, in fact, impossible to achieve. Faced with the imperative to attain self-knowledge and the impossibility of ever being certain that one has acquired it, a person may be brought to despair, or may attempt to ease the anxiety that this condition can provoke by falling into self-deception. This self-deception occurs when one forces “certainty about one’s state that is not in fact forthcoming.” The way to avoid these failures in the pursuit of self-knowledge is to fulfill this obligation under the guidance of “humble confidence.” As Grenberg states,

… instead of clinging to a fanatical certainty about her motives and disposition, or collapsing in a fit of self-absorbed despair, a humble agent confidently engages in the limited, fallible, and continually revisable pursuit of knowledge about herself. Humble confidence is the attitude most appropriate to the stable and morally productive pursuit of derivative self-knowledge.

Humble confidence results in a settled sense of self-worth in which an individual is confident in her absolute worth but is also acutely aware of her condition of dependence and corruption, both as a human being generally and as a particular person. A virtuously humble person has the proper orientation toward the duty of self-knowledge. She is able to reflect upon her actions, motives, and character traits and, with a good degree of

---

50 Grenberg, Humility, 226.

51 Ibid, 230.

52 Ibid, 235. Although it seems most apt to refer to humble confidence as a meta-virtue appropriate for “dependent and corrupt but capable and dignified,” Grenberg often discusses humility itself as a meta-virtue that functions in much the same way as humble confidence. This is, perhaps, because she believes it to be true that virtuous humility implies virtuous self-respect.
confidence, make assessments of her moral status. She is also appropriately leery of being too confident in her assessments. According to Grenberg’s Kantian analysis, humility is crucial to the pursuit of the kind of self-knowledge that empowers individuals to be more capable moral agents.

Other scholars, working within other moral traditions, have also affirmed the importance of humility for self-knowledge – especially knowledge of one’s limits, both moral and non-moral. Nancy Snow reminds us that self-knowledge is “intrinsically valuable.” Humility conduces to the realization of this value. Snow claims that humility can be manifested in a “narrow” sense when individuals identify various personal traits as “deficiencies.” Humility can also be manifested in an “existential” sense when individuals confront the limitations that are part of being human, that is, when they experience the reality of human finitude. Humility allows for a clearer picture of what is possible for any given person by challenging ignorance and self-deception. When we confront our limits with humility, according to Snow, we allow our awareness of these limits to inform and deepen our self-understanding. This enriched self-understanding will in turn contribute to our ability to live our lives more wisely and successfully.

Lisa Fullam also identifies humility as critical for the pursuit of self-knowledge, broadly construed. In her terms, “humility is a virtue of self-knowledge.” The self-

---


54 Ibid, 206.

55 Ibid, 206.

56 Snow’s example of how a paralegal might accept his limits in his decision to pursue law school illustrates this point: Snow, “Humility,” 214-15.

knowledge facilitated by humility is not simply an awareness of one’s limits or deficiencies, however. Drawing from Aquinas, Fullam argues that humility is essentially a virtue that enables us to know ourselves “in context.” Humility is the virtue responsible for drawing us away from excessive self-centeredness by enabling us to be “other-centered.” Only by being appropriately other-centered can we acquire genuine self-knowledge. Fullam claims that we live in a “multiplicity of social contexts greater than ourselves … if we desire to see ourselves with greater accuracy, we will seek a better vision of the contexts in which we live. If true self-understanding in context is a desirable end for human beings, then humility is the virtue by which that understanding is gained.”

Like Grenberg, Fullam argues that humility is a “meta-virtue.” It is a virtue required for the development of other virtues. Humility enables us to know that our very understanding of moral truth, upon which we base our notions regarding what is virtuous, good, or right, is limited by our fallible grasp of such truth. It enables us also to act in accordance with that knowledge. The other-centeredness that characterizes humility for Fullam brings us outside of ourselves and enables us to consider the truth as others experience and know it. Opening ourselves up in this way can enable individuals to reach deeper insights and move closer to the truth which then allows them to adjust their understanding of the appropriate target range for any given virtue. Fullam clarifies this point with the following example:

If I see justice only as I know it from my own particular struggles with justice, I don’t see other possible opportunities for justice: I have established by own experience as the referent for justice, which limits my capacity to see different

58 Ibid, passim.

59 Ibid, 129.

60 It is worth noting that the insights of others do not always and necessarily lead closer to the truth.
ways in which I might be just. My progress in justice is stultified. By the practice of humility, we gain a better knowledge of virtue, and thus can pursue it ourselves in more and varied ways and circumstances. We come to know virtue better.  

Humility is essential, according to this perspective, if we are to progress in living a life of virtue.

In a similar vein, Jay Newman argues that humility is a “necessary condition of self-realization.” Although he does not develop as sophisticated an account of humility as Grenberg or Fullam, he does assign a powerful role for humility in an individual’s life. Humility, according to Newman is the virtue by which a person becomes aware of his or her “mission” to become a better person by realizing more of his or her potential. Newman does not view humility as simply about focusing on one’s limits and failures. Instead, he claims that humility is about becoming aware of the ways that we fail to live up to the ideals that inspire us to become what we are capable of becoming. It enables the awareness that one is always, regardless of how “virtuous and talented” one is, “in the process of realizing” one’s true potential. This is a necessary step if one is to achieve greater self-realization. Humble people are different from what Newman calls “self-
impressed” people because they recognize that they are not yet as good as they could be. According to Newman, the “self-impressed person … concentrates on how much more he has realized ideals than other people have …. He looks backwards rather than forwards.” For Newman, humility is thus important for an individual’s ability to become a better person generally and to become better in more specific areas of his or her life.

Thus far, this chapter has brought attention to various understandings of humility and various reasons for maintaining humility’s status as a virtue. Despite the widely diverse perspectives from which these authors approach the virtue of humility, they all demonstrate that humility has significant value. However, because these perspectives are so diverse, we seem to be presented with, what Grenberg calls a “dizzying patchwork of portrayals of the humble person.” We have seen humility described as a “civic virtue” and a “public ethos.” Others claim that humility is a “dependent virtue” that is important for only the greatest among us and is important for the preservation of an ethos of respect for human dignity. Humility (or humble confidence) can also be described as a “meta-virtue” – one that is important for limited human beings to cultivate if they are to be well oriented toward the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of self-knowledge. Or, humility is the virtue responsible for enabling people to make sound life choices in response to an accurate understanding of their own limits. It is also possible that humility is best understood as the key virtue in propelling individuals forward on the path to self-

65 Ibid, 284.

66 Grenberg, Humility, 6.

67 Button views humility as a “public ethos” but he does not provide a real sense for how such an ethos would be widely cultivated or endorsed. It is admirable to recommend a widespread spirit of humility in which all citizens are aware of their limits, what remains to be seen is how such a collective spirit would be established and what kind of complications might arise in the process. In addressing these issues it is possible that Button would be drawn into considering the implications of his version of humility for those who are oppressed in society.
realization. At this point it may seem appropriate to agree with Grenberg’s analysis that “… in the end, we don’t really know what humility is.”

The aim of this dissertation is to articulate a compelling account of the virtue of humility. This account will share many of the traits that other figures have identified as making humility valuable and worth cultivating while also presenting a distinctive approach in defining it. One of the major concerns of this dissertation is to be attentive to the problem of oppression while thinking about how best to define humility. Doing this well requires a bit of bridge building. Very few of the thinkers presented thus far make explicit reference to the problem of oppression. Bringing oppression into focus requires making use of scholarship that is acutely aware of it. However, reflection on humility is largely absent from scholarship that advocates for or presents the perspectives of those who are marginalized and oppressed. An important first step in initiating a conversation is to identify a common interest that is capable of pulling these two relative strangers together. In this case, the common interest concerns the idea of “accurate self-understanding.”

As a virtue, humility is a character trait. It is best conceived of as a disposition to think, feel, and act consistently in accordance with an accurate self-understanding. Such an understanding is developed in light of an awareness of one’s limitations and one’s inherent dignity as well as one’s particular accomplishments and possibilities. Feminist reflection on relational selfhood is especially helpful for developing an understanding of the limits and possibilities associated with being relational selves. Part of the reason feminists call attention to the relational self is to highlight the way that a failure to accept our fundamental interdependence as humans has led to the promotion of individualistic

---

68 Grenberg, Humility, 6 (emphasis added).

69 If they do, it is often given relatively scant attention.
values that unfairly benefit and support certain members of society over others. As a virtue that calls individuals to adopt an accurate self-understanding as they make morally significant life choices that have an impact on their own lives and the lives of those in their communities, humility ought to taken seriously by feminist thinkers.

**Humility and the Relational Self**

A wide range of theorists have been drawn to the idea of “relational selfhood” over the past several decades. Their aim, broadly speaking, is to challenge prominent philosophical conceptions of selfhood that idealize independence, self-sufficiency, and the ability of the rational person to transcend or otherwise overcome various “external” (i.e., other than self-generated) influences in directing his or her own life. Moral and political philosophies that are based on overly-individualistic accounts of the self are misguided and potentially harmful.

To understand humility’s distinctive contribution to the flourishing of the relational human self, it is important first to explore the idea of relational selfhood. We must ask, what does it mean to say that human beings are essentially or constitutively relational?

---

70 The term “relational selfhood” tends to be preferred by feminist thinkers. Similar conceptions of the self are also sometimes called the “social self” (most often used by communitarian thinkers) or the “embodied self” (commonly used by postmodern thinkers). In some ways even describing the self in terms of language and narrative is a means of constructing a relational conception of selfhood. In so far as one forms and interprets one’s identity in encounter with others through language, one’s identity is always formed in a relational context. To detail the development of these perspectives would take us far beyond the aims of this dissertation. Some useful thinkers to consult for further study are: Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Paul Ricoeur, Marilyn Friedman, Carol Gilligan, and Nel Noddings. (See Bibliography for complete references)

71 For further development of this point see the many critiques of the forms of injustice present in societies heavily influenced by the assumptions and ideals associated with political liberalism. These critiques are articulated by such thinkers as Robert George, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Michael Perry, Seyla Benhabib, and Jeff Stout. (See Bibliography for complete references)

72 I consider experiences of liberation to be an integral part of human flourishing under conditions where all forms of oppression have not been eliminated.
There are four points about relational selfhood that deserve our attention if we are to understand why humility is valuable. In outline, to say that human beings are essentially or constitutively relational beings is to acknowledge that: 1) we are born into and continue to exist in, and by virtue of, relationships of dependence and care; 2) our individual identities are fundamentally and continually influenced and, indeed, partly constituted by our relationships with others; 3) we are always and everywhere, despite pretentions to the contrary, situated in a particular social, cultural, and historical context – to the extent that we can hardly imagine ourselves outside of this context; and 4) we are embodied beings who respond to and are affected by our environment in ways that we can be consciously aware of and yet escape our efforts to understand them fully.

Annette Baier calls due attention to the ways that human beings develop into maturity as persons. In her parlance, we are all “second persons” who mature only in relationship with other persons.\textsuperscript{73} As she notes, “… distinctive human phenomena, including language and other cultural activities, as well as mathematics and science, depend upon the relatively long period of human maturation ….”\textsuperscript{74} We rely on others to help us acquire the skills necessary for becoming mature persons who can function well in the world in which we live. As infants we are utterly dependent upon others to discern and satisfy our most basic needs, including the need for language. As we develop we continue to rely on others for guidance, assistance, and sustenance. We are continually being composed by – and of – these interrelationships.

Because we are mortal, we periodically become ill and get injured; if we are lucky enough to live into old age, we become increasingly more dependent upon others to help us satisfy even our most basic needs. Even in our healthy periods of maturity, our

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{73} Annette Baier, \textit{Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals} (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1985), 84.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 84.
\end{itemize}
relationships of mutual care are of tremendous value. Lorraine Code elaborates on Baier’s notion of second personhood to claim that our “…uniqueness, creativity, and moral accountability grow out of interdependence and continually turn back to it for affirmation and continuation.” Our dependence upon others is not simply a regrettable fact of life; it is a major source of our development and growth. Because we exist in conditions of interdependence, we are both cared-for and care-givers. We benefit by receiving and giving care, in some form, almost continually. Although the degree to which we are dependent on or give care to others, and the form in which this caring is provided, can and does shift throughout any particular person’s life time, it is hard to deny that all of us exist and flourish, if indeed we flourish, in relationships of interdependent care.

Our relationships with others are also important for self-definition. In a sense, our closest relationships form the boundaries within which we come to know who we are as particular individuals. As we navigate our lives into maturity we can either sever or build relationships in accordance with our changing self-understanding. Kathryn Norlock has captured this identity-formation dimension of our relationality nicely:

Although most of us, to varying degrees, consider our family background a part of who we are, we do not settle for having these relationships and none others. Instead we go looking for friends, lovers, and intellectual communities with which to identify, in part to intentionally separate from our family and discover our distinctiveness. …it is a further strength of the relational account that it explains how our conceptions of our selves do change as our relations change. Figuratively (and sometimes literally) speaking, we change shape as we include some people and exclude others. Thinking of past relations we have altered or severed, we may find ourselves thinking, ‘I do not resemble the person I was then.’


76 I have in mind here the development of patience, the ability to feel the pull of responsibility, and the ability to understand other people’s claims for our attention and care.

77 Kathryn Norlock, *Forgiveness from a Feminist Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 44.
As Norlock suggests, which relationships we choose to nurture and which we choose to neglect or sever, is of no small consequence.

Not all of our relationships influence us in direct and obvious ways. Some influence us indirectly and subtly. For example, we may be influenced in ripple-like ways by the smile we receive from the familiar cashier at the grocery store. We are also all influenced by the broader cultural and historical contexts in which we live. That we are all culturally situated is a further implication of our status as “second persons.” We depend on others not only for basic necessities, but also to teach us the social norms thought to enable us to navigate our lives well within our societies. Although we often come to a point where we can consciously accept or challenge many of the norms with which we have been enculturated, we are often not consciously aware of all of the ways that cultural norms inform our understanding of the world and our place in it. Feminist philosophers have been particularly interested in pointing out the ways that even some of the things we hold fundamentally and universally to be true are tied to certain cultural assumptions. That we are, in Seyla Benhabib’s terms, “situated selves” means that we can never escape fully the influence of our social, historical, and cultural location. Who we are and who we become depends in large part on forces way beyond our control. All of these things: intimate relationships of mutual care and interdependence, identity shaping relationships with others, and the broader cultural and social contexts in which we are situated work together to form who we are and who we will become.

78 I am drawing mostly upon feminist standpoint theory in making this point. A further exploration of this point brings us deep into the realm of epistemology - an area well worth exploring, but not immediately necessary to develop here. It also appears to be broadly accepted now that we are all culturally bound in significant ways, that our finitude and our relationality mean that we can never achieve a “view from nowhere.” For further exploration consult: Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., Feminist Epistemologies (New York: Routledge, 1993); Nancy Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing a Grounding for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” Discovering Reality, edited by S. Harding and M. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983), 283-310; bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984); Seyla Benabib, Situating the Self (New York: Routledge, 1992).
It is important to make explicit that we come to an understanding of ourselves, our world, and of the people around us as embodied persons; we reason, make choices, and perform actions as embodied persons; and we live our lives together with others as embodied persons. In so far as we are embodied, we are always living in relation to the world around us in a physically and materially significant way. Reflection on embodiment calls to mind the emotional and cognitive complexity of our human nature. As embodied beings, we interact with and respond to our environment in our bodies and through our senses. More specifically, we experience sensations, passions, feelings, and emotions that enable us to connect with the world around us in a way that is felt. Emotional experiences and passionate responses are valuable indicators of the kinds of things we hold to be most important, valuable, true, and real. Recent philosophical and ethical reflection on emotion has shown that our drives, desires, passions, and emotional states are more than simply troublesome tendencies that require the use of reason to tame and control. Instead, they are complex and integral aspects of human personhood that can teach us a great deal about what we value and why we value it. Focusing on embodiment allows us to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the moral significance of our various bodily experiences.

Embodiment is important also because all of our social and cultural interactions are mediated by the body. Human experiences of embodiment become the stage on which cultural and social forces play themselves out. For example, wearing a certain style of clothing in a certain way can become a means of maintaining societal norms regarding class, race, or gender. One’s posture, gait, and the degree to which one occupies physical

---

79 There is a significant amount of scholarly literature on human emotion available for consultation from a variety of perspectives. Most important for my own thinking have been: Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2009); and Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001).
space (taking up very little space by shrinking into oneself, or taking up a lot of space with large movements and gestures) can also play a significant role in cementing social and cultural norms and values. Being playful in the way that we occupy space with our bodies can be an important way to challenge those norms and values, or at least to bring them to the foreground for conscious attention and critical reflection.80

Bringing these dimensions of relational identity into focus allows us to think more clearly about the kinds of limits we and others face as human beings. For example: we are limited in the degree to which we can achieve self-understanding; we are limited by our differing mental and physical capabilities; and we are limited in the degree to which we can be self-sufficient, free, and self-determining. As a virtue that brings our limits into focus, humility keeps us from thinking, feeling, and acting on the basis of a distorted self-understanding. There are different ways to characterize such distortions. On the one hand, people can fail to understand the limits set by the relational human condition. When they do so, they lack what Nancy Snow has termed, “existential humility.”81 One consequence of this lack is that individuals become more likely to have a diminished appreciation of how their actions influence others, or how their lives have been influenced by others, which can lead them to behave in ways that are unwittingly harmful to others. In a more idiosyncratic vein, individual persons can also fail to understand the nature of their own particular limitations. They can fail to understand what is or is not possible for them at any given moment or in their lifetime,82 or they can misjudge the


81 Snow, “Humility,” passim.

82 As happens when, say, a young and inexperienced teacher, fueled by his faith in the ability of educators to help make the world a better place, expects to be as able to facilitate great steps toward positive change as more experienced effective educators (who became who they are
value of their accomplishments by failing to understand these accomplishments within a broader context. In these cases, a person demonstrates a lack of “narrow humility.”83

If we respond well to our conditions of interdependence and embodiment, accepting our limits can lead to the experience of becoming open to new possibilities. In this case understanding our limits becomes a condition upon which certain limits can be stretched.84 If we respond poorly we risk becoming complacent. This appears to be the worry expressed by Button in his challenge to liberal attitudes of tolerance and civility. The difference between simple tolerance and active engagement is huge. Tolerance enables a person to remain largely unchallenged by perspectives and experiences that are different from her own. It can give rise to a nonchalant, “live and let live,” kind of relativism that allows one to live comfortably with others who appear to experience life in much the same way as oneself.85 It can be easy to ignore one’s limitations if one does not attempt to face those limits by considering the experiences of diverse others that can be difficult to understand. As Button’s analysis of civic humility suggests, the political consequences of this kind of ignorance in such diverse societies as our own can be

only after years of teaching). When something like this happens, a person misunderstands what is actually possible and runs the risk of self-deception when it comes to analyzing his accomplishments or failures. Too strong of an attachment to an inappropriate standard or ideal might lead him to convince himself that his teaching does result in the kind of change he is envisioning when, in fact, it does not. It may also lead him to interpret ordinary and common mistakes as significant failures. Such an assumption might cause him to leave prematurely a profession he once felt called to, which could diminish his own life satisfaction and possibly rob the community of a potentially very valuable educator.

83 Ibid, passim.

84 Stretching limits does not necessarily mean overcoming them. What I am getting at here is the fact that certain things, like accepting one’s social and cultural situatedness can help one to orient oneself toward others who are differently situated in such a way as to expand one’s perspective by learning from the experiences of others.

85 This kind of relativism seems to be an attitude made affordable by conditions of privilege, in which the demands of justice that make this kind of relativism impossible are not felt so heavily as they might be in the “margins” of society.
terrible. He notes, “unless and until we are collectively engaged in the task of understanding the nature and ground of the values and beliefs that others honor, we are not in a position to critically reconsider how contemporary practices and institutions are often complicit in their own forms of repression, silencing, exclusion, and humiliation.” Opening up to the possibility of the kind of “mutually enriching” engagement with others that Button recommends requires becoming sensitive to our “contingency” and “incompleteness.” It entails bringing to our awareness the ways that we have been shaped by those who raise us, by our cultural context, by those with whom we relate intimately on a regular basis, and by our own bodily experiences. An awareness of these limitations enables one to cultivate a disposition to be open to reshaping oneself by benefiting and learning from encounters with others.

The re-shaping made possible by engaging with diverse others can be a difficult and painful process. It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the connection between becoming aware of our limits and the willingness to be open to the uncomfortable experience of stretching those limits. Because humility involves bringing our attention to our limits on an “existential” level it helps us respond well to the painful experience of encountering our limits. A person who has come to accept that her perspective will always be limited will be more likely to expect that her encounters with others will expose those limits. This may make the blow to her self-understanding and to her understanding of the truth less severe over time. By calling attention to our relational

---


87 As the concept of relational identity suggests, individuals will always be limited in the degree to which they truly understand themselves because no one can be totally transparent to him or herself. This means that understanding oneself in relational terms enables one to expect that one will be limited even if one does not always know each and every particular limit. For example, it is possible to be generally aware that one’s worldview is shaped by certain cultural forces, but not be aware of how one’s particular positions regarding certain matters are so culturally shaped. It is often not until one encounters another with an alternative position, formed on the basis of a competing worldview, that such limits in perspective are exposed.
nature, humility enables the acceptance of the fact that we will never not be dependent on others to help us to discover and get closer to understanding what is true and good about life. Fullam seems to be making a point similar to this by defining humility as a “meta-virtue” that contributes to a healthy form of skepticism. Humility regulates a person’s understanding of the degree to which anyone can grasp fully what is true about life and about what it means to live in accordance with that truth. Without a basic understanding of the limits set, in part, by our relational nature we are less likely to be open to learning from others and, therefore more likely to be content with a limited grasp of some of the most fundamental truths of life.

Grenberg’s perspective on humility reminds us that this process of truth seeking will never be complete. But it is precisely because we recognize that it will never be complete that we can become comfortable with uncertainty and avoid trying to force a sense of certainty by resisting challenges to our understanding. When we pause to consider the many complex ways that our bodily experiences and our physiology, our families, friendships, and acquaintances, and our cultural context inform our self-understanding and our grasp of what is ultimately true it becomes clear that we will never be able to understand all that is going on here. Finding opportunities in our relationality to learn from others can, however, help us to understand a good deal.

---

88 By “healthy skepticism” I mean to signal here that some forms of skepticism are valuable for helping to avoid cutting oneself off from diverse sources of truth. Skepticism can also become “unhealthy” when it too readily slides into a kind of nihilism or relativism. For more on this distinction see Lorraine Code, “Taking Subjectivity into Account,” in Feminist Epistemologies, edited by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).

89 As was mentioned previously, the way we feel about what we observe in others and in ourselves can tell us a great deal about what we value. Some things just feel wrong or right. Sometimes these feelings are valuable for bringing us to an understanding of moral truth, but they may also be the result of an adoption of certain social and cultural values that, upon reflection, are misguided and harmful to many in society.

90 This is, perhaps, quite idealistic in that we also learn a great deal from others that is harmful and distorting. Our relationality opens up both opportunities for self-knowledge and opportunities for ignorance, falsity, and self-deception. It is worth noting that it matters greatly
The human condition is characterized by mutual interdependence. Recognition of our interdependence is key for inspiring the kind of commitment to the common good that Mary Keys is interested in. Keys stresses humility’s role in the cultivation of a disposition to serve others well by checking the vice of pride. Reflection on the nature of relational selfhood brings to light the way that pride can be manifested in a failure to recognize or a willful refusal to acknowledge one’s dependence on and responsibilities toward others. In this form, pride is best understood as an over-estimation of self-worth in which a person somehow considers himself beyond needing the help of others or as too important to care for others in all but the most superficial ways. Individuals who pridefully overestimate their self-worth in comparison with others see their own concerns as preeminent in a given situation; they are more likely to see relationships of dependence as burdens to be shed, as impediments to their own happiness, or as opportunities to exercise vicious forms of manipulation and control. Humility is a virtue that brings into focus the way pride can infect how we experience relationships of interdependence.

Because we are by nature interdependent, our relationships of dependence and care-giving have tremendous value. We can approach these relationships to others willingly, resentfully, or manipulatively. Our ability to flourish as relational selves depends on the extent to which we embrace our condition of interdependence and open up ourselves to a full appreciation of the value of service to others and of trusting and depending on them. This kind of self-understanding is necessary for motivating the pursuit of the common good. One must acknowledge that one’s own flourishing is tied to who one is in daily relationship with. Our relationality is also a source of hope in this way since it is possible to move closer to the truth and farther away from ignorance and self-deception by changing who one is in relationship with and working to change one’s broader communities.

This openness ought to be bolstered by an ability to judge the degree to which others can and ought to be trusted. In part, this is why I argue further on in the dissertation that it is best to view humility in relation to other important virtues.
the flourishing of others if one is to understand the importance of working to secure the good of all.

Keys’ discussion of the vice of pride highlights the emotional dimension of the virtue of humility – a dimension that ought not to be overlooked. Humility is not only about acquiring a cognitive understanding of the nature of one’s limits, it is also about regulating one’s emotions so that they reflect such an understanding. The vice of pride is a stable disposition to feel an inordinate amount of self-love and an inordinate desire for attention and praise, on the basis of an over estimation of one’s self-worth. One feels more important than others “to the universe”\(^92\); one feels as though one’s own happiness and one’s own concerns are more important than they really are. Humility thus helps to keep individuals from over-estimating their self worth. On the other hand, the complex webs of relation and interdependency in which human beings are situated also highlight that no individual is a mere nothing. One’s being and behavior influences others and the whole. One can, through one’s choices and behavior make a positive contribution to the good of the whole. Humility as developed in light of relationality ought not to contribute to an unduly low sense of self-worth according to which one fails to understand one’s true value.

Considering the above points, it appears that humility is incredibly valuable at the “existential” level since acquiring a basic understanding of relational identity and the limits and possibilities set by relationality is key to helping us orient ourselves properly toward truth and toward the basic conditions of interdependence. Humility operates at a different, “narrower” level as well.\(^93\) It concerns how any given individual relates to his or her particular accomplishments or faults and limitations, whether these be moral or


\(^93\) See p. 47 for the distinction between existential and narrow humility.
non-moral. As several authors noted above, a modest or humble person will have a realistic and non-over-exaggerated sense of the value of her accomplishments. Reflection on the nature of relational identity suggests that a realistic appraisal of one’s accomplishments will require one to acknowledge the many contributions others have made to one’s own success.\textsuperscript{94} If this is the case, it does not seem right to classify modesty as a virtue of ignorance as Driver does. Instead humility involves showing a deep awareness of the dependent nature of one’s accomplishments or strengths. A limited awareness of the kind that Driver praises might actually tempt one to think that these accomplishments were not significantly influenced by those around one, by one’s culture, or by one’s particular, unchosen genetic endowment.

Statman’s account is also dissatisfying because of its failure to address the limits set by human relationality. An excellent person, as Statman has depicted him, will have a strong inclination to treat others with disrespect. However, a person who has a proper understanding of the degree to which his success depends on those around him would not be so inclined. Ben Ze’ev and Richards both articulate more compelling accounts of the connection between an awareness of human situatedness and interdependence and a

\textsuperscript{94} Such contributions can come in various forms. They can range from the care one receives in the form of emotional support, encouragement, and nourishment to the conditions that previously made for the maintenance of an environment in which one could develop one’s strengths, to the labor that went into getting food from the field to the store so that one could stay healthy while pursuing one’s goals. For example, my ability to write depends on many things: it depends on the community of support around me that helps me to sort out difficult puzzles, deal with frustrations, and deal with the demands of caring for a family; it depends on the financial support I receive that allows me the time necessary for writing; it also is a result of my having been trained by excellent educators and mentors; it also depends on my being physically up to the task, which means that it depends on the individuals who keep my local grocery store stocked so that I have access to food, and it depends on those who pick the fresh fruits and vegetables that I eat and those that manufacture and distribute the other goods I use that are necessary for living. Acknowledging such contributions can come in many forms also, through expressions of gratitude, a willingness to support others in their times of need, or a willingness to pay a fair price for goods so that those upon whom I depend for so many things are given a fair wage and treated with respect.
properly humble disposition by recognizing that one’s accomplishments ought always to be considered in light of the countless contributions of others, both large and small.

Reflection on relational identity highlights the need for a virtue that helps us to understand our human limits and to live well within the boundaries set by them. Because we are interdependent by nature, we rely on others to do things for us that we cannot do, to help us to become aware of our mistakes and to help us to correct them, and to help us discover what is possible for us in our lives. Humility helps us to see our limits, to seek help from others when we need it, and to tailor our expectations and hopes for our lives in recognition of our limits. Newman is right that humility, by exposing us to the reality that we have not yet achieved all that is possible, is valuable for various projects of self-realization. What he does not acknowledge, however, is that there are some heights that we cannot achieve, and that to continue to pursue them as though we could may cause more damage than good. Humility encourages the realization that all of one’s words and actions can have either a beneficial or a damaging influence on others, both directly and indirectly. Just as we are dependent on others, they are dependent on us. Acknowledging this brings with it a tremendous responsibility that we must learn to handle.

This chapter has explored several different accounts of humility and the many reasons we have to value it. It has pulled together contemporary reflection on humility and feminist reflection regarding the relational self in an effort to show that, given the many things that humility has to offer as a virtue, feminist thinkers have good reason to take humility seriously as important for relational selves. Contemporary accounts of humility lack sustained reflection on the liberative potential of the virtue of humility, however. As a result, they are not likely candidates for an account of humility that will be appealing to feminist thinkers or others who are interested in working toward liberation from oppression. The liberative dimension of humility was suggested earlier in recognition that acknowledging one’s basic limits can itself be a means of stretching other limits. Humility can be liberating also in so far as it is tied to a neither over- nor
under-inflated sense of self-worth. To see how humility is able truly to contribute to liberatory aims, however, more work needs to be done.

The Thomistic account developed later in this dissertation shows more of the liberative potential of humility by clarifying how humility operates relative to such virtues as temperance, courage, and justice. There are, however a number of critical questions to consider before we can develop a robust and satisfying account of the virtue of humility. Chapter 2 examines some of the most historically significant and poignant critiques of humility and in so doing indicates the most important questions that any account of humility ought to address.
CHAPTER TWO: CRITIQUES OF HUMILITY

Any attempt to grapple with the nature and value of humility is complicated by the diversity of available characterizations. Developing an adequate account of humility becomes even more difficult when one considers that humility is not, and has not historically been, universally regarded as virtuous. Several of Western history’s most significant thinkers argue that humility is best conceived as a vice – a trait that inhibits rather than promotes human well-being. The aim of this dissertation is to articulate an account of humility that allows a person reasonably to regard it as a virtue. This means, among other things, that humility ought to make a positive contribution to human flourishing, which entails a degree of liberation from unjust forms of oppression.

In order to develop such an account of humility it is necessary to identify the concerns raised in some of strongest and historically most significant arguments for defining humility as a vice. Humility’s legacy as virtue or vice depends on how successfully an account of virtuous humility addresses these concerns. This chapter turns to four thinkers who consider humility to be more vicious than virtuous. These thinkers denounce humility as a character trait that contributes to submissiveness, self-abasement, and self-contempt. In contrast, they praise freedom and self-confidence. David Hume, Benedict Spinoza, and Friedrich Nietzsche each claim, for various reasons, that humility has no place among the list of virtues. Feminist philosopher Mary Daly provides a feminist analysis of the way in which hegemonic virtues can, and often do, work against the interests of the oppressed. From her and the others’ accounts we can further specify key concerns to keep in mind in developing an account of humility as virtuous and liberative.
David Hume

Early modern philosopher, David Hume is frequently cited for being one of the most ardent challengers of humility. In a well-known condemnation of humility he writes:

Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man’s fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices …

As this passage suggests, Hume is repulsed by the way “monkish virtues” prevent people from becoming valuable and enjoyable members of society and from being able to enjoy their own lives. According to Hume, for any quality of character to count as a virtue rather than a vice it must be one that is agreeable or useful to oneself or to others. Hume claims that if one were seriously to reflect on the nature of the moral life, one would realize that the dispositions we value and admire are those that are conducive to producing joy and happiness in our own and others’ lives.

Because we are social creatures, Hume argues that we are moved in important ways by the suffering and joy that others experience. We take pleasure in another’s


2 Hume offers a number of different “definitions” of virtue throughout his Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals. They all are rooted in the basic claim that a quality’s virtuousness depends on its agreeableness and/or usefulness. See: Hume, Enquiry, 68.n.

3 For our purposes, it is sufficient to remain within this basic sketch of Hume’s understanding of the nature of morality. To go beyond this would involve us in debates and issues that are worthy of much more attention than is possible to give in this dissertation. For more on Hume’s understanding of morality and the concept of sympathy see: Annette Baier, A Progress of Sentiments (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP) 1991; and David Fate Norton, “The Foundations of Morality in Hume’s Treatise” in The Cambridge Companion to Hume, edited by D.F. Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 270-310.
doing well, in her pleasurable demeanor, or in her strength of character. We experience discomfort and a degree of pain at the thought of another’s suffering, of her negative disposition, or of her weak and uninspiring character. When we reflect on these experiences of pleasure and pain, it becomes clear that the things we classify as “good” or “bad” morally are those things that, respectively, either promote (the feeling of) human happiness or detract from it. From Hume’s perspective, this suggests that our moral obligations are derived from our moral feelings of (pleasing) approval and (painful) disapproval. In essence, for Hume, “…morality is always, in the long run, concerned with making human life more enjoyable.”

Hume states,

Whatever is valuable in any kind, so naturally classes itself under the division of useful or agreeable … and everything useful or agreeable must possess these qualities with regard either to the person himself or to others, the compleat [sic] delineation or description of merit seems to be performed as naturally as a shadow is cast by the sun, or an image is reflected upon water. If the ground, on which the shadow is cast, be not broken and uneven; nor the surface, from which the image is reflected, disturbed and confused; a just figure is immediately presented, without any art or attention. And it seems a reasonable presumption, that systems and hypotheses have perverted our natural understanding; when a theory so simple and obvious, could so long have escaped the most elaborate examination.

If we think clearly about the moral life, free from the delusions of false religion and culturally reinforced superstition, it is obvious, Hume thinks, that the kinds of character traits and behaviors we value are those that we consider to be pleasant or useful. Because our thinking has been distorted, however, such a simple point about the moral life has long evaded us. We have endorsed visions of morality that work against our own

---


5 Hume, *Enquiry*, 72-3. It is ironic that there has been much debate about Hume’s apparently so “simple” and “obvious” grounding of morality in natural human sentiments. Again, to go into the vast amounts of scholarly reflection on exactly what it means for Hume to ground morality in our natural human sentiments and how he goes about arguing against competing rationalist conceptions of morality would take us too far afield. It is, of course, incredibly difficult to sort out what it means for the ground to “be not broken and uneven” when it comes to human nature and morality. The *Cambridge Companion to Hume*, eds. D.F. Norton and J. Taylor (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993) contains a helpful bibliography for further exploration.
happiness. Metaphorically, the ground is “broken and uneven” and the surface is “disturbed and confused.” The truth of the moral life has been obscured from our understanding.

Hume classes humility with a number of other dispositions that rely on what he considers to be a distorted picture of human nature and morality. What bothers Hume about the “monkish virtues” is their association with a view of morality as the practice of restraining worldly and self-interested desires in an effort to please the divine or serve the interests of social structures that Hume believes to be unjust and authoritarian. Hume does not take the time to define humility as distinct from the other “monkish virtues” with which he classes it. However, a look at the characteristics that he associates with humility gives us a good sense of how he might define humility.

According to Hume, humility belongs with a number of other sober, dour, and severe character traits that work actively against making one’s mortal life more enjoyable. These so-called “virtues” are identified within major strands of Christian thought in which the mortal life is viewed with suspicion and scorn. According to the Christian worldview with which Hume was familiar, the pleasures associated with mortal existence are more temptations and opportunities to sin than they are indications of genuine value. Being “of this world” amounts to a kind of idolatry by which one denies the lordship of God and worships the things of this realm, oblivious to the fact that this leads only to greater misery, in the long run. Humility, according to dominant voices in the Christian tradition, is an essential virtue for living in proper submission to God’s will. It is the virtue that counteracts pride, the vice/sin that is chiefly responsible for an

individual’s refusal to see, understand, and live in accordance with the ultimate truth of life.

Considering the fact that the most prominent Christian perspective in the Scotland of Hume’s day was Calvinist, it is instructive here to glance at some of John Calvin’s reflections on humility. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin writes:

…if it is deemed disgraceful to be ignorant of things pertaining to the business of life, much more disgraceful is self-ignorance, in consequence of which we miserably deceive ourselves in matters of the highest moment, and so walk blindfold [sic]. But the more useful the precept is, the more careful we must be not to use it preposterously, as we see certain philosophers have done. For they, when exhorting man to know himself, state the motive to be, that he may not be ignorant of his own excellence and dignity. They wish him to see nothing in himself but what will fill him with vain confidence, and inflate him with pride. But self-knowledge consists in this, … when viewing our miserable condition since Adam’s fall, all confidence and boasting are overthrown, we blush for shame, and feel truly humble. … it is impossible to think of our primeval dignity without being immediately reminded of the sad spectacle of our ignominy and corruption … we feel dissatisfied with ourselves and truly humble…

The link between an attitude of humility and an attitude toward earthly human existence as sad and corrupt is by no means found only in Calvin and Calvinism. Hume saw this strand of thought as characteristic of the whole of Christianity. Consider St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s understanding of humility as developed in his exposition of St. Benedict’s *Rule for Monasteries*. St. Bernard claims that humility is the virtue that leads a person to the truth. It is “that thorough self-examination which makes a man contemptible in his own sight.” Here too, humility is conceived as the virtue responsible for bringing to one’s awareness one’s sinful nature, the truth that one is nothing without God, and the many ways one gives into worldly temptations that draw one away from God. According to Hume’s understanding, humility, like celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, and the

---


like only makes sense as a virtue inside a religious worldview that scorns the pleasures of the mortal life in an effort to direct people’s energy toward their “spiritual” lives.

Hume argued that this kind of disposition could not reasonably be understood to be agreeable. In fact, humility appears to be a character trait that works intentionally to make life disagreeable. Again, we can look to St. Bernard to see this perspective being expressed. For St. Bernard, humility involves “acceptance of the fact that you are a man and therefore willingness to undergo that for which man is born – toil and sorrow.”\(^9\) For Hume, if a person thinks that she deserves nothing but toil and sorrow, she will only expect, and may intentionally pursue, such things and will be prevented from truly enjoying life.

Humility is unpleasant; moreover, it is not useful for the self or others, according to Hume. He argues that our desire for fame, our drive to be recognized and celebrated by others, is valuable because it inspires continual reflection on our conduct and character and thereby “keeps alive all the sentiments of right and wrong, and begets, in noble natures, a certain reverence for themselves as well as others; which is the surest guardian of every virtue.”\(^{10}\) The kind of reflection needed for the strengthening of our understanding of right and wrong depends on our underlying desire to be recognized and approved of by others. The acquisition and maintenance of virtue is a decidedly this-worldly exercise for Hume.

---

\(^9\) St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Steps of Humility*, 55. At face value, it does seem as though St. Bernard is here promoting a kind of “disagreeable” life for the Christian. However, it is important to recognize that he, and other Christian thinkers, can be interpreted with more subtlety than Hume exhibited. It is possible, as many people claim to experience great joy in the promise of the afterlife. Furthermore, it is important not to forget that even in a life of “toil and sorrow” the ultimate aim for all Christians is to love and serve God, and in so doing, many Christians claim to experience joy. It is clear that Hume thought that religious beliefs were often more pernicious and harmful than they were helpful – this predisposes him to be less nuanced in his treatment of these issues than we might like him to be. For example, in lumping all of the “monkish virtues” together, Hume ignores the distinctive natures of each and therefore ends up giving them all a rather unfair treatment.

\(^{10}\) Hume, *Enquiry*, 77.
As indicated, Hume thinks of humility as a character trait that relies on acquiring a deeply suspicious attitude toward the material world and mortal existence.\textsuperscript{11} From a religious perspective that celebrates virtues such as humility, to view the desire for fame as an admirable, if not a necessary, step in securing a virtuous character is to claim that pride is a good moral motivator, when instead it is the most grievous of sins. From a Christian perspective the pride that compels a person to seek the praise of others is a manifestation of a sinful drive to love the self above all else – more than one loves God. From Hume’s perspective, those who strive to cultivate the “monkish virtues” do not acquire the disposition necessary to nurture the development of the virtues that really are necessary for making life more enjoyable. Clearly there is a fundamental disagreement here regarding what is and is not of value for human life.

Because traditional Christian humility is based on the belief that one deserves a miserable life of sorrow and toil in light of one’s wretched condition, it also facilitates what Hume calls, “meanness.”\textsuperscript{12} Humility seems to be linked to vicious self-denial or self-loathing and Hume suggests that,

we never excuse the absolute want of spirit and dignity of character or a proper sense of what is due to one’s self in society and the common intercourse of life. This vice constitutes what we properly call meanness; when a man can … fawn upon those who abuse him; and degrade himself by intimacies and familiarities with undeserving inferiors. A certain degree of generous pride or self-value is so requisite, that the absence of it in the mind displeases …\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12} Hume, \textit{Enquiry}, 63.

\textsuperscript{13} Hume, \textit{Enquiry}, 63.
Humility and the other “monkish virtues” cannot be understood to be *useful* for oneself or others because they eradicate a powerful motive for virtue and contribute to a displeasing disposition toward a weakness of character, which Hume calls “meanness.”

In sum, humility does not meet Hume’s requirements for virtue. It renders people unpleasant to be around because of their sober, serious, and anxious demeanor. It may be true that Hume is hasty and brash in his characterization of humility because of his underlying skepticism of religion. However, he brings to our attention some important questions: to what extent does humility impinge on a person’s ability to enjoy life? Does humility, inasmuch as it calls attention to one’s limitations and faults, make life less pleasant? To what degree is it appropriate to define a character trait as a virtue if it is rather unpleasant to experience? Furthermore, we must consider whether humility is useful in any significant sense. Perhaps there is more to this virtue than Hume acknowledges.

**Benedict Spinoza**

Hume is not the only philosopher to have concerns about the supposed value of humility. Writing nearly a century before Hume, Benedict Spinoza also had concerns. As a rationalist philosopher, Spinoza’s conception of virtue and of what it means for human beings to live well differs significantly from Hume’s sentimentalist perspective. Spinoza sees the good human life as one in which a person is able to avoid being pulled or swayed by her “passions” and instead lives a life of reason that is “free” of unnecessary external influence. A person who “is led solely by emotion or opinion” is a “slave,” whereas a “free” person is “led by reason” and is “his own master and only performs such actions, as he knows are of primary importance in life and therefore chiefly desires.”

The things that are of importance for human beings are those matters that contribute to their ability

---

14 *Ethics* IVp66s. Insofar as there are conditions in which an individual is led only partly rather than solely by emotion, Spinoza would claim that such a person is only *partly* free.
to live active rather than passive lives. Human beings are most active when they are acting on the basis of reason and genuine understanding rather than on the basis of confused ideas brought about by an inadequate understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Spinoza claims that all things that exist are defined, in part, by a striving to exist, which he terms conatus. Insofar as they exist, all things are driven, by virtue of this conatus to persist in their being. The conatus, according to Steven Nadler, also “provides a real metaphysical basis for distinguishing one thing from another, insofar as these parcels of power are distinct from each other and often strive against each other.”  

Nadler explains that the concept of conatus “accounts for why stones are hard to break, why a body at rest or in motion will remain at rest or in motion unless it encounters an outside force, why the human body fights disease, and why we desire many of the things we do.”  

This striving, according to Spinoza, is best understood to be the “actual essence” of a thing. He explains, “…wherefore the power of any given thing, or the endeavor whereby, either alone or with other things, it acts, or endeavours to act, that is, the power or endeavor, wherewith it endeavours to persist in its own being, is nothing else but the given or actual essence of the thing in question.” It follows that the essence of human beings, as of all other things, is this striving for perseverance. The problem that many of us face is that we are confused and misled about what will contribute to our perseverance. To the extent that we fail to think rationally and clearly, we are vulnerable to being overpowered by external forces which are beyond our control - we are “in bondage” to our passions. In order to escape this bondage, human beings should strive to


16 Ibid, loc 4452

17 Ethics IIIp7.
live an active life based on genuine understanding, which is what enables greater persistence in being.18

Our power to persist as rational beings is increased the more rational we are. For Spinoza, reason is the activity of a mind that truly understands, clearly and distinctly.19 For a human being to pursue his or her genuine good is to pursue knowledge and understanding. Spinoza claims, “the mind, insofar as it reasons, desires nothing beyond understanding, and judges nothing to be useful to itself, save such things as conduce to understanding.”20 Understanding is essential for living an active rather than a passive life. Nadler explains, “…the individual acting out of passion is not really acting at all but rather reacting. Only the individual whose desires and choices are guided by adequate ideas (understanding) is an individual whose actions are generated by his own nature and is thus doing what naturally and necessarily follows from his conatus alone.”21

18 Fully to trace the many connections here would take us into areas of Spinoza’s thought that do not directly have to do with his understanding of humility. In brief, however, because human beings exist as finite modes existing under the attributes of thought (mind) and extension (body) of the singular substance (God or Nature), Spinoza claims that the highest and most perfect aim (that which constitutes the end of one’s striving) is intuitive knowledge of God. For more on Spinoza’s understanding of the summum bonum see: Michael LeBuffe, From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010).

19 Ethics IVp26-27.

20 Ethics IVp27s.

21 Nadler, Spinoza’s Ethics, Ch. 8, loc 4971, emphasis added. Although it can be difficult to formulate the exact relationship between conatus, reason, and desire in human beings it is helpful to recognize that, as a monist, Spinoza does not argue that the conatus is an operation of a distinctive faculty like the “will.” As I understand it, conatus within humans is expressed in active reasoning, or in desires whose true causes are understood. Nadler is helpful here: “In action, the mind’s increase in its capacities derives from its own knowledge. That is, the mind is active when its striving for perseverance (desire) is guided not by the random ways in which external objects affect the body, but rather by understanding. The difference is like that between pursuing things because they make you feel good and pursuing things because you know that they are truly good for you. … When desire is led by adequate ideas … the resulting desire and judgment is for what is truly in one’s best interest as a rational being” (Ch. 7, loc 4778).
Virtue, according to Spinoza, is reason in action. To act in accordance with virtue is, “the same thing as to act, to live, or to preserve one’s being … in accordance with the dictates of reason on the basis of seeking what is useful to one’s self.”\(^{22}\) When it comes to humility, Spinoza claims that “humility is not a virtue, or does not arise from reason.”\(^{23}\) He claims that humility is best understood as a painful emotion, rather than a virtue. Pain, for Spinoza, is one of the three basic emotions of which all other emotions are variations. Human beings experience the emotions of pleasure or pain when they transition between states of greater or lesser perfection. Pleasure is associated with the movement from a state of lesser perfection to a state of greater perfection. Pain is experienced when the opposite occurs.\(^{24}\) The above sketch of Spinoza’s concept of freedom and the good life suggests that human beings become more “perfect” the more rational they are, the more they understand via adequate ideas, and the more they live their active lives in accordance with that understanding.

In his definitions of the emotions, Spinoza defines humility thusly: “humility is pain arising from a man’s contemplation of his own weakness of body or mind.”\(^{25}\) According to his understanding of the basic emotions, humility by definition, involves a transition from a state of greater perfection and activity to a state of lesser perfection and increased passivity. Although he does not elaborate much on humility, Spinoza suggests that the contemplation of one’s weaknesses causes pain because it involves interpreting those weaknesses as limits to one’s striving. There is surely more going on here, however. The problem with humility concerns also the way a person contemplates his or

\(^{22}\) *Ethics* IVp24.

\(^{23}\) *Ethics* IVp53.

\(^{24}\) *Ethics* III D emotions 2-3.

\(^{25}\) *Ethics* III D emotions 26.
her own weaknesses. What seems to distinguish humility from other forms of pain is the way in which it makes an individual out to be the source of her own pain. The painful emotion of humility arises when an individual reflects on her faults, limits, and other weaknesses and feels as though these are an essential part of who she is or that she is significantly responsible for them. Insofar as she feels responsibility for these things, she becomes a cause of her own pain.

What is problematic about humility is its inherent link to the pain associated with mistaken judgments about the self. Human beings, like all other things, are driven to exist in accordance with their true nature. Spinoza puts this point succinctly when he writes, “No one, therefore, neglects seeking his own good, or preserving his own being, unless he be overcome by causes external and foreign to his nature. No one, I say, from the necessity of his own nature, or otherwise than under compulsion from external causes, shrinks from food, or kills himself …”

According to Spinoza’s picture, no one who acts from reason would deliberately work against his own striving to persist. Insofar as humility is the experience of pain caused by a person’s reflecting on his own weaknesses of which he mistakenly believes himself to be the cause, he contributes to his own diminishing power to act in accordance with his nature. He becomes his own enemy, and this is not something a rational person would do.

A further problem with humility is its potential to lead to a harmful kind of self-contempt or “self-abasement.” Shortly after reflecting on humility, Spinoza considers the emotion of self-abasement which he defines as, “thinking too meanly of one’s self by reason of pain.” The connection between humility and self-abasement seems to be that the pain experienced in humility can lead to the experience of self-abasement. Spinoza writes:

---

26 *Ethics IVp20s.*

27 *Ethics III D emotions 29.*
…for it may happen, that a man, sorrowfully regarding his own weakness, should imagine that he is despised by all men, while the rest of the world are thinking of nothing less than of despising him. Again, a man may think too meanly of himself, if he deny of himself in the present something in relation to a future time of which he is uncertain. As, for instance, if he should say that he is unable to form any clear conceptions, or that he can desire and do nothing but what is wicked and base, etc. We may also say, that a man thinks too meanly of himself, when we see him from excessive fear of shame refusing to do things which others, his equals, venture.28

Humility is problematic, then, not only because it is a source of pain, but also because it typically leads to self-abasement, which has a further negative impact on a person’s ability to thrive because it causes a person to lower her expectations for her life.

It is important to examine here, what Spinoza might argue is the proper way for a person to deal with his or her various weaknesses. As stated above, the viciousness of humility lies in the experience of pain, which is engendered by a false judgment or a lack of clear understanding. As one increases one’s rationality and thus one’s virtue one decreases one’s experiences of pain. However, Spinoza does not develop a picture of human flourishing in which a free person has or recognizes no limits.29 How might Spinoza characterize a rational relationship to one’s limits?

Spinoza acknowledges that we are heavily influenced by external forces30 and it is an incredibly difficult task to move from ignorance to understanding. Furthermore, he acknowledges that human beings are rational, but finite beings who will never be able to be entirely free from being passive in significant ways to the world around them.

28 Ethics III D emotions 28.

29 Spinoza argues that pain cannot be understood to be an active emotion (and therefore cannot be understood as an emotion that contributes to one’s movement toward greater perfection). He writes: “… all emotions can be referred to desire, pleasure, or pain, as their definitions, already given, show. Now by pain we mean that a mind’s power of thinking is diminished or checked…; therefore, insofar as the mind feels pain, its power of understanding, that is, of activity is diminished or checked…; therefore, no painful emotions can be attributed to the mind in virtue of its being active, but only emotions of pleasure and desire, which are attributable to the mind in that condition.” (Ethics IIIp59s)

30 “External” forces would be those that are other than our own conatus.
According to a Spinozist perspective, a positive relationship to one’s own limits involves a growing realization of this fact. The more a person increases her understanding of her limits, the more she can discern which are necessary or unavoidable and which are remediable, and she thereby increases her power of activity. This increase is not a painful experience: rather, it is pleasant. Insofar as a person comes to understand that she is a finite being, like everyone else, she does not feel any of the sorrow that typically attends mistaken thinking about the self.

Even if one does not favor Spinoza’s rationalist picture of the good human life, his characterization of humility gives us something important to think about: is there truth to the claim that humility essentially is or entails a painful experience? If so, is it also true that humility cannot, therefore, rightly be regarded as a virtue? In developing an account of humility as a virtue we must attend to the connection between humility and pain if we are to respond to Spinoza’s criticism.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Insofar as humility is experienced as a kind of pain in which one becomes the cause of one’s own diminished power of being, one is, according to Spinoza, enslaved to one’s passions and not living a free and active life. Although his conclusions are quite different from Spinoza’s, a brief examination of Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of humility shows that Nietzsche, too, is interested in showing humility to have a strong relationship to experiences of pain and suffering. Like Hume, Nietzsche is satisfied to lump humility together with a host of other religiously-inspired “virtues,” finding in them a common thread that justifies their dismissal. That humility is celebrated as a virtue is a symptom of a larger problem, according to Nietzsche. Humility can be understood to be a virtue only in a context dominated by the moral code of the weak and powerless. To celebrate humility is to celebrate a “slave-morality.”

To understand the depth of a Nietzschean critique of humility it is important to highlight the distinctive characteristics that Nietzsche associates with humility. Because
he views humility negatively, as an expression of a “slave-morality,” it is clear immediately that humility, for Nietzsche is something more than a relatively benign acceptance of one’s finitude or one’s limitations. As we saw earlier in this chapter, some Christian conceptions of humility suggest that humility is a virtue that gives rise to a laudable kind of self-contempt, in which one understands oneself to be deserving of lowliness, understood as a humble, powerless, and servile status. The Christian tradition, as Nietzsche observes it, celebrates humility as one of the tradition’s most important virtues because of its ability to “root out” the sin of pride in human beings and therefore render them appropriately subservient to God. Furthermore, the Christian tradition, inspired by teachings such as Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” in which the weak and “poor in spirit” are counted among God’s most favored, perpetuates the notion that it is better, morally speaking, to be weak than strong, to be powerless rather than powerful, forgiving rather than vengeful, and humble rather than prideful. From Nietzsche’s perspective, humility makes a virtue of self-contempt. It celebrates weakness, and is constituted by a refusal to seek greatness for oneself.

Why is it a problem to celebrate weakness and hold oneself back in the pursuit of greatness? Because these attitudes maintain the “slave-morality” that had, in Nietzsche’s mind, become culturally dominant. For our purposes, the connection between humility and “slave-morality” is important for two reasons. First, Nietzsche’s analysis of the slave revolt in morality develops a point raised but not thoroughly explored by Hume and Spinoza: humility, though seemingly about overcoming pride, is actually motivated by a type of pride, which Nietzsche calls our “will-to-power.” Second, humility becomes a key habit in the formation of the ascetic ideal, which gives rise to a nihilistic rather than an affirming orientation to life.

31 In the case of humility and slave-morality the will-to-power is misdirected toward a moral code that actually weakens rather than strengthens it.
On the Geneaology of Morals is Nietzsche’s attempt to understand the origins and motivations behind a moral code that celebrates “unegoistic” character traits such as self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, patience, and humility. It is these character traits that Nietzsche finds so threatening. His analysis exposes the self-interested motivation that drives even the most apparently self-denying dispositions. He seeks to free his readers to think differently about the nature of the moral life.

According to Nietzsche all of life is characterized by a fundamental motivating principle that he calls the “will-to-power.” According to J. Keeping, Nietzsche’s concept of the “will-to-power” is an “attempt to define what life is in terms of what life does. Life simply is that thing, anything, that seeks to grow stronger, overcome itself, etc.” A moral code that contradicts this underlying drive could emerge only in a certain context, according to Nietzsche’s analysis. A moral code that celebrates powerlessness, emerges out of the experiences of the powerless themselves. Those who are the oppressed, the weak, and the lowly are also driven by a “will-to-power” insofar as they are living beings. However, their efforts at attaining any actual power for themselves are consistently thwarted. Because of this, Nietzsche argues that the weak, fueled by ressentiment toward a world that continually denies them the power they seek, create their own moral code in opposition to that of the powerful and “noble.” The weak thus “empower” themselves not with any actual power, but with an imaginary sense of empowerment by creating a moral code that is premised on valuing and celebrating all that opposes what the moral code of the powerful endorses.

32 J. Keeping, “The Thousand Goals and the One Goal: Morality and Will-to-Power in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra,” European Journal of Philosophy 20:S1, June 2012, p E78. According to Keeping’s description it appears as though there might be some interesting connections between Spinoza’s concept of conatus and Nietzsche’s concept of the “will-to-power.”

33 GM,1, pp. 24-56, passim.
According to Nietzsche, “in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world.”\textsuperscript{34} Against this hostile world, the world beyond this one becomes the real/true world of value. According to a slave morality, the hostile world becomes that which is to be negated and de-valued. The theistic God – the ultimate, other-worldly, creator and arbiter of all that is – favors the weak and the oppressed and those who turn away from the pleasures and pursuits of this world. Those who are weak, powerless, and humble by circumstance convince themselves that they have chosen the ideal path through life, and they are morally superior for having made this choice. They believe that they will be rewarded for their suffering and their toil and for their refusal to pursue “worldly” power.

It is worth quoting Nietzsche’s own, lengthy, but artistically written, depiction of this process. He writes,

Weakness is being lied into something \textit{meritorious}, … and impotence which does not require into ‘goodness of heart’; anxious lowliness into ‘humility’; subjection to those one hates into ‘obedience’ (that is, to one of whom they say he commands this subjection – they call him God). The inoffensiveness of the weak man, even the cowardice of which he has so much, his lingering at the door, his being ineluctably compelled to wait, here acquire flattering names, such as ‘patience,’ and are even called virtue itself; his inability for revenge is called unwillingness to revenge, perhaps even forgiveness …. They are miserable, no doubt of it, … but they tell me their misery is a sign of being chosen by God; one beats the dogs one likes best; perhaps this misery is also a preparation, a testing, a schooling, perhaps it is even more – something that will someday be made good and recompensed with interest…. This they call ‘bliss.’ Now they give me to understand that they are not merely better than the mighty, the lords of the earth whose spittle they have to lick (not from fear, not at all from fear! But because God has commanded them to obey the authorities) – that they are not merely better but are also ‘better off,’ or at least will be better off someday. But enough! Enough! I can’t take any more. Bad air! Bad air!\textsuperscript{35}

It is clear to Nietzsche that those who claim to be choosing the selfless, non-power-seeking path are in fact attempting to satisfy their drive for power with imagined power

\textsuperscript{34} GM, 1.10, p.37.

\textsuperscript{35} GM 1.14, p. 47.
rather than actual power.\textsuperscript{36} The values expressed in slave morality are those appropriate for people who have no actual way out of their circumstances, who must find a way to express their will-to-power in a relatively satisfying way.

What we can glean from this brief exploration of Nietzsche is that, in his view, there is no escaping self-interest. Virtues that gain their status as virtues because they serve as a check on self-interest require extra scrutiny. One has to dig deeply to expose the underlying and sometimes cunningly disguised plays for power. But the underlying desire for self-aggrandizement is there.\textsuperscript{37}

For Nietzsche the problem is not the existence of a self-interested will-to-power, but the fact that Christians refuse to recognize this power and embrace it as good. In the preface to \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals}, Nietzsche poses a challenging question: “What if … morality would be to blame if the \textit{highest power and splendor} actually possible to the type man was never in fact attained? So that precisely morality was the danger of dangers”\textsuperscript{38} In this question Nietzsche indicates the depth of his worry about the dominant moral code of his day. Nietzsche believes that Christians adhere to a morality of the weak, and this morality renders them increasingly incapable of achieving the “highest power and splendor” possible for them.

Christian moral ideals, according to Nietzsche, ultimately promote a nihilistic orientation toward life, as epitomized by the practice of asceticism. The ascetic is a

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{GM} 1.10 states: “The slave revolt in morality begins when \textit{ressentiment} itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the \textit{ressentiment} of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.”

\textsuperscript{37} For Nietzsche, power-seeking is obviously not, in itself, something to be worried about. It is the nature of life to seek greater power, to become more and to be more. One need not endorse his entire picture of the moral life of human beings, however to take from him a healthy suspicion about the degree to which we can be non-self-interested, and whether or not non-self-interestedness is a valuable goal.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{GM} Preface.6.
person who spends her life devaluing this-worldly pursuits and the parts of herself that draw her to these pursuits in an effort to attain a greater, other-worldly, glory. Under the influence of the ascetic ideal human beings have become “…a nook of disgruntled, arrogant, and offensive creatures filled with a profound disgust at themselves, at the earth, at all life, who inflict as much pain on themselves as they possibly can out of pleasure in inflicting pain – which is probably their only pleasure.” The will-to-power finds a kind of satisfaction in the ascetic ideal only because life itself becomes an enemy to the ascetic, and the continual battle of self against self is capable of occupying a person’s drive for greater power (at least for a time). Nietzsche describes it thusly:

the most common means that the ascetic and saint employ to make their lives nonetheless bearable and amusing consists of occasionally waging war and alternating between victory and defeat. For that, he needs an opponent and finds him in the so-called ‘enemy within.’ He makes use especially of his proclivity for vanity, ambition, and love of power, and then of his sensual desires, in allowing himself to look upon his life as an ongoing battle and himself as a battle field on which good and evil spirits struggle with varying success.

Under the influence of the ascetic ideal human beings take periodic delight in triumphing over aspects of themselves that they regard as base. Under the influence of humility, in

---

39 It would take us too far afield to explore this fully but it is worth acknowledging at this point that, for Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal as he observed it in his day was not relegated only to the religious context. The slave revolt in morality he describes in the first essay is one of many possible contexts in which the ascetic ideal can thrive. Nietzsche remarks that the ascetic ideal is “one of the most widespread and enduring of all phenomena. Read from a distant star, the majuscule script of our earthly existence would perhaps lead to the conclusion that the earth was the distinctively ascetic planet …” (GM 3.11). Even philosophers who accepted the “death” of the God of theism continued to embrace and endorse the moral code and the ascetic ideal prevalent in the Judeo-Christian context. The third essay of On the Genealogy of Morals examines how and why philosophers, not just ascetic priests, embrace the ascetic ideal, and the complicated way that the ascetic ideal made philosophy possible, even though it is now time to move beyond this ideal (how this could happen coincides with Nietzsche’s concept of the will-to-power as expressed in creativity and overcoming).

40 GM 3.11.

particular, Christians accept as good the suffering of a life characterized by powerlessness or an active struggle against one’s own ambitions for more. Christians turn what could have been a powerful motivator for something better and greater into a way to keep themselves weak and, as Nietzsche puts it, make themselves smaller and “thinner.”

In summary, Nietzsche argues that we should not be deceived about what humility actually is. Humility is a manifestation of the will-to-power of the weak by which they acquire an imagined sense of power even in their positions of actual powerlessness. As Nietzsche sees it, humility is always motivated by self-interest, despite the professed intentions of those who cultivate it. It is also a turning of one’s will-to-power against oneself: because humility is the opposite of pride, the former is a character trait that fights against human ambition, the drive toward excellence and greatness, and the drive to create. As such, it causes human beings to settle for an ordinary and mundane existence. Humility keeps a person from being able to live a rich, and truly fulfilling life.

Mary Daly

For radical feminist philosopher Mary Daly, the revolutionary and ground-breaking critiques of the dominant, religiously-inspired morality launched by Nietzsche and others are highly valuable. They help to expose the relationship between interests of power and the prevailing cultural morality. Ultimately, however, these critiques fail because they do not go far enough. Nietzsche, according to Daly, was “the prophet whose

---

42 Nietzsche writes: “For this is how things are: the diminution and leveling of European man constitutes our greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary. – We can see nothing today that wants to grow greater, we suspect that things will continue to go down, down, to become thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian – there is no doubt that man is getting ‘better’ all the time. Here precisely is what has become a fatality for Europe – together with the fear of man we have also lost our love of him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him. The sight of man now makes us weary – what is nihilism today if it is not that? We are weary of man.” (GM 1.12).
 prophecy was short-circuited by his own misogyny.”\textsuperscript{43} Daly and other feminist thinkers claim that Western philosophical and theological reflection has been dominated by the perspectives and experiences of socially privileged males who universalize their perspectives. The Western tradition thus lacks the kind of awareness of the dynamics of gender oppression that being a critically aware member of the oppressed classes can afford.

Daly argues that, in order for there to be a genuine “transvaluation of values”\textsuperscript{44} that establishes the social conditions and individual moral attitudes necessary for moving beyond pathetic oppressor/oppressed dynamics, society requires an aggressive feminist critique of patriarchal morality. Daly brings into sharp focus the way that culturally dominant moral codes, including ways of understanding what counts as virtuous or vicious, function in a sexist society to maintain and reinforce existing power imbalances. Her hope is to spur critical thinking and creative activity challenges and ultimately transcends the limits to individual and social flourishing, particularly women’s flourishing, imposed in a society driven by the desire to sustain sexism.

Daly draws from her own and other women’s experiences to expose the ways that a culturally dominant, widely accepted, “feminine” or “passive” ethic works against women and other oppressed groups.\textsuperscript{45} Much like the previous thinkers in this chapter, particularly Nietzsche and Hume, Daly claims that “there has been a theoretical one-

\textsuperscript{43} Mary Daly, \textit{Beyond God the Father} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 102.

\textsuperscript{44} The phrase is famously Nietzsche’s.

\textsuperscript{45} Mary Daly argues that the underlying dynamic of oppression that supports all other manifestations of oppression is sexism. This perspective is controversial, particularly because her understanding of how sexism functions in society is shaped by her own experience as a relatively privileged white woman. This bias is particularly evident in her assertions that “women” were socially seen as being the ideal in terms of virtue because of the way that “women” lived out a feminine ethic. This ideal status, however, only applied to certain women, and the experience of the way that sexism works against these women is not the same as how it plays out for women who are non-white, or not economically privileged.
sided emphasis upon charity, meekness, obedience, humility, self-abnegation, sacrifice, service,” etc., in traditional western philosophical and religious reflection. Daly suggests that patriarchal society has thrived in the West in large part because of the way this passive ethic has been accepted. Daly strives to show that even in a culture dominated by what Nietzsche would call a “slave-morality” or what she calls the “passive ethic,” some individuals and groups do have actual power that can be and is used to dominate others. Oppressors use the language of the passive ethic while simultaneously engaging in deeply self-interested, domineering, and unjust behaviors or participating in institutions that maintain oppression.

What makes Nietzsche a prophet is the way in which he calls attention to the fact that there is a great deal of power-seeking hidden behind the language and moral code of non-power-seeking. For Nietzsche, the threat is that all will become weak and that this dominant moral ethos will lead to nihilism. For Daly, the problem is that this language and moral code of the “passive ethic” disguise attempts to secure conditions of unjust power distribution between men and women; they sustain gender oppression by limiting the ability to see, think, imagine, and live outside of or to challenge that reality. People who have significant power and privilege are able to keep that status because the language of the “passive ethic” covers up and disguises what is really happening. Daly writes,

… the qualities that are really lived out and valued by those in dominant roles, and esteemed by those in subservient roles, are not overtly held up as values but rather are acted out under pretense of doing something else. Ambitious prelates who have achieved ecclesiastical power have been praised not for their ambition but for ‘humility.’ Avaricious and ruthless politicians often speak unctuously of sacrifice, service, and dedication. Daly writes,

46 Daly, Beyond, 100.

47 Daly, Beyond, 100.
Real power in society comes from ambition and avarice, but these traits are often covered over by the language of passivity.

Because the “passive ethic” is so widely accepted and so successfully used to disguise self-interested motives, it becomes even more difficult to develop the kind of critiques that differentiate just from unjust means of attaining and distributing power. Daly suggests that, according to the norms expressed in the “passive ethic,” pride is the worst vice and the most harmful enemy to genuine flourishing. This means that self-interest of all kinds becomes “bad.” Power, glory, and honor seeking become “bad.” Failing to put another’s interests before one’s own becomes “bad,” etc. If this is the case, argues Daly, then the possibility of deeper critique is cut off. According to Daly,

… since the general effect of Christian morality has been to distort the real motivations and values operative in society, it hinders confrontation with the problems of unjust acquisition and use of power and the destructive effects of social conditioning. Since it fails to develop an understanding and respect for the aggressive and creative virtues, it offers no alternative to the hypocrisy-condoning situation fostered by its one-sided and unrealistic ethic.48

Those who are oppressed in patriarchal society are socialized not only to present themselves as faithful to the “passive ethic” but to endorse it. They fail to differentiate their own interests from those they have been socialized to have (or to think they have). In other words, they have a kind of false-consciousness about who they are and what is possible or desirable for them. The “passive ethic,” when endorsed by the oppressed, makes people suspicious of their own desires and ideas for change. As Daly mentions, this ethic does not value “aggressive and creative virtues.” This culturally dominant ethic therefore leaves people without an easily identifiable means of understanding how to take their legitimate concerns for their own happiness and well-being seriously enough to challenge the oppressive structures within which they live.49

---

48 Daly, Beyond, 101.

49 At times it may seem that Daly does not make much room for a robust account of individual agency, but I don’t think she would say that the condition of false-consciousness
As Daly highlights, humility has traditionally been a key player in the “passive ethic.” Because humility has been understood to be the virtue responsible for overcoming pride – the vice of all vices – one can say that it has been the most important player. Thus, according to Daly’s understanding, for women who are interested in challenging and over-coming a patriarchal system that is maintained in large part by the “passive ethic,” humility is not really a virtue, but a vice. The “passive ethic” functions to keep those who do not have the social power and privilege necessary for living a full, self-directed life from attaining it.

True liberation is a condition in which one lives a powerful, creative, and self-directed life free from the limits set by an unjustly hierarchical society. In order to achieve such liberation, Daly argues, women must bring about a substantial shift in the way they think about what character traits are valuable. Daly is renowned for making creative use of language. In a way that is often simultaneously beguiling and inspiring, she challenges her readers to think differently about common concepts. In her effort to formulate more liberating conceptions of virtue, she re-names the traditional cardinal virtues in order to highlight how feminist virtue differs from dominant ways of understanding virtue. For Daly, these reconceived virtues have an important role to play if women are to be able to experience genuine happiness.

Pyromantic prudence, in distinction from the prudence associated with the classical tradition, provides women with the wisdom needed to challenge the status quo means that individuals have no agency. By this I mean that they have no real awareness of their own needs and desires and of the various ways that they are prevented from satisfying those needs in an oppressive society. Daly is not very clear about how one escapes the false-consciousness that comes from socialization. Primarily, she suggests that when women in patriarchal society begin to share their own experiences and to work to create new possibilities for themselves others will come to an awareness of how they have been socialized as well. This is similar to what is commonly called the process of consciousness-raising or “conscientization.” Daly does not analyze the deeper philosophical questions about what it means to be a self that is both a distinct individual and a socialized, deeply relational, person.
and make decisions that appear to be extreme to outside observers. Those who have
cultivated pyromantic prudence cannot settle for simply making choices in accordance
with the mean relative to widely accepted cultural understandings of reality, because they
are trying to change that reality. Traditionally, as Aristotle and others argue, prudence
concerns the means chosen to realize given ends rather than the ends themselves. Daly
exposes the way in which commonly accepted “ends” of action function to preserve
patriarchy and stifle the creative energy of women and others who are effectively linked
to the feminine.

Pyromantic prudence empowers women “to question precisely the taken-for-
granted ends/purposes that have been embedded in women’s psyches from earliest
childhood.”50 Pyromantic prudence encourages women to draw from their own authentic
experiences51 to challenge patriarchal norms that impede their ability to identify the
“deep purposes” that move them and that act as their true “final causes.”52 Women who
have cultivated the virtue of pyromantic prudence are likely to behave in ways that
appear extreme and their wisdom is likely to appear outlandish to the average observer
because it challenges traditionally accepted norms.

Daly argues further that it is best to move away from traditional understandings of
justice to embrace what she calls the virtue of “nemesis.” Nemesis “transcends and
overturns patriarchal ‘justice’ and ‘injustice.’”53 Those who seek justice remain within

50 Mary Daly, Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy, (London: The Women’s Press,
2001), 264.

51 Authentic experiences would be those that are not shaped by patriarchy. These
experiences can be difficult to understand and uncover, according to Daly. This is why she
includes docility, understood as the “free use of the ability to learn” from one’s self and from
other women as an important part of pyromantic prudence. (Daly, Pure Lust, 267).

52 Daly, Pure Lust, 266.

53 Daly, Pure Lust, 275.
the boundaries of accepted patriarchal norms; they merely attempt to “rectify” problematic situations using traditional means and language. Nemesis is capable of more than meting out rewards and punishments. Its cultivation propels women toward the creation of a new future. According to Daly, “justice” as rectification cannot be a virtue for women who are interested in moving beyond the status quo:

… rectify suggests that the task is to straighten out, correct, redress, remedy, reform a situation, that is, to re-turn it to a previous condition that is understood on the same level as the 'problem.' The procedure sounds like correcting an error in arithmetic; it appears to be correcting an imbalance, restoring balance. There is nothing in this language that stirs the imagination beyond a patriarchal future and past, a regainable status quo.54

Justice is incapable of empowering women. Nemesis empowers them to respond creatively “to the tormented cries of the oppressed, and to the hunger and thirst for creative be-ing.”55 In responding to those cries, individuals who have cultivated nemesis are encouraged to think beyond the norms of justice to work toward a more creative future.

Moving toward this future requires “outrageous courage” rather than traditional courage. Outrageous courage is about harnessing one’s emotional and intellectual strength (rage) to overcome and move beyond patriarchal ideologies. Outrageous courage is vitally important, according to Daly, because it is the virtue responsible for enabling women to overcome the alienation from themselves caused by a culture that thrives on a dualistic distinction between passion and intellect. Overcoming this alienation, or “taking heart,” as Daly describes it, is the way women in a sexist society can begin to understand what it means to be whole persons and to be treated accordingly. She writes,

the symbol of the heart as center has been spoiled for countless women … by the sickening sadosophism that ‘man is the head, and woman is the heart.’ For the

54 Daly, Pure Lust, 276.

55 Daly, Pure Lust, 275.
cliché is intended to legitimate women’s condition of subjection…. The sadosages speak euphemistically of the heart as representing the ‘central wisdom of feeling’ as opposed to the ‘head wisdom’ of reason. … No matter how highly patriarchal propagandists extol what they call ‘the heart,’ their ascribing of this to women says it all. The ‘central wisdom of feeling’ is intended to signify mush-headed sentimentality requiring control by The Head.

Outrageous courage occurs when women take heart enough to unite their passion and their intellect in defiance of traditionally accepted norms and in pursuit of a new way of being.

The last of the cardinal virtues explored by Daly is the virtue of “pyrosophical temperance” which she opposes to traditional conceptions of temperance that promote timidity and being “prim and proper.” Daly understands pyrosophical temperance to be about measuring rightly the “complex elements” involved in the struggle against patriarchy. Pyrosophical temperance requires resiliency and the strengthening of one’s connection to the self whom one is striving to be. It also requires keeping a kind of “calmness of mind” in the midst of the struggle. It is the virtue responsible for helping feminists exercise the right amounts of strength, attunement to liberating forces, passion, and calm in recognition that the right amounts of these things for feminists will appear to be wild and ill-measured to others.

These re-conceived virtues contribute to a process by which one pushes oneself beyond the ordinary and beyond the typical ways of thinking, feeling, and acting which keep one within the familiar limits set by the patriarchal system. Daly’s re-conceived virtues seem “extreme.” But it is precisely their extreme quality that makes it possible

---

56 Daly, Pure Lust, 280.
57 Daly, Pure Lust, 286.
58 Daly, Pure Lust, 287.

59 It is interesting to think about what Daly’s “cardinal virtues” would look like in a non-patriarchal context. Given her construction of them in opposition to patriarchal and traditional understandings of virtue it might appear that Daly’s virtues will only be virtues in the context of the struggle against patriarchal oppression. In other words, it may seem that these virtues are virtues that serve only liberative aims and as such rely on conditions of oppression in order to be
for them to contribute to women’s happiness by enabling them to participate creatively in their own be-ing and becoming.\textsuperscript{60}

Daly’s reflection on virtue exposes another concern about humility. Humility is linked with moderation. However, the liberatory virtues can and should clash with the widely accepted understandings of what counts as virtuous. If humility is the virtue by which one moderates one’s desires, thoughts, and activities to be in line with an “accurate” understanding of who one is and of what is possible for oneself, but one’s self-understanding is heavily based upon how one has previously been socialized, it will likely be the virtue by which one remains static. It may prematurely cut off the kind of critical questioning necessary for understanding what justice (or nemesis) requires, calm the fire of courage that is necessary for over-coming the obstacles in the way of genuine happiness, and keep the reasoning of prudence well within the bounds of culturally dominant and acceptable categories of truth and knowledge. Instead of revolutionary and liberating virtues, women will exercise “potted virtues” which Daly describes as being “less than they should be and therefore dysfunctional, potentially deadly (like an extremely low blood count, or hypothyroidism),” and women will be satisfied or “ful-filled” with far less than they ought to be.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{60} Daly hyphenates be-ing to indicate that the ideal for women and men is to not be static but to be constantly moving, changing, and creating – this is where happiness is found, for Daly. The problem with oppression and with societies that rely on the dynamics of oppression to sustain themselves is that the very possibility of be-ing rather than simply being, in a static state, is severely limited.

\textsuperscript{61} Daly, \textit{Pure Lust}, 206-7.
In the critiques of humility explored in this chapter we have encountered several important concerns that we ought to take with us into our more constructive efforts. Hume identifies humility as a character trait that causes human beings to be sickened and disgusted by themselves to the point that they are unable to enjoy their mortal lives and make positive contributions to the lives of others. His critique urges us to consider whether he is right. To respond to Hume’s critique we must show humility to be, in a significant sense, useful or agreeable for oneself and for others. Spinoza shares with Hume a concern about the degree to which humility is linked to pain. Spinoza claims that humility is essentially a painful emotion. As such, it diminishes a person’s ability to flourish as an active rational agent. In response to Spinoza we must examine the degree to which humility is typically or necessarily linked to being pained by one’s limitations. Some limits may involve being pained by encountering or experiencing them and others may not. In any case, we ought to be sensitive to this issue in developing an account of how humility functions relative to one’s experience and awareness of limits.

Nietzsche sees humility as duplicitous and ultimately harmful because it makes an individual his or her own enemy. There is always a kind of self-interest at work even when disguised by language of self-deprecation and self-abnegation. In response to Nietzsche we ought to ask whether humility is essentially about self-abnegation or whether it is possible to exercise a form of humility that is consistent with acknowledging and openly affirming our underlying self-interest, including our interest in living good lives. The question then becomes, what does a humility that values the self look like? Finally, Mary Daly suggests that humility works against the oppressed by encouraging habits and norms of behavior that support the patriarchal status quo. She encourages an analysis of virtue in context. Her feminist perspective is especially important for demonstrating that virtues, including humility, function differently depending on one’s social context and location.
Each of the figures in this chapter attempt to show that humility is best understood as a negative character trait – one which detracts from human flourishing in a significant way. Their evaluations of humility are, naturally, tied to the way they define it. If we are to look more favorably on humility and to see how it might contribute to human flourishing then humility must be defined in a particular way. In the next few chapters we turn to Aquinas, viewing his thought through a feminist critical lens.
Aquinas’s sustained reflection on humility in the *Summa* occurs in the *Secunda secundae*, in the midst of his broader discussion of virtue. Although question 161 is the unit of the *Summa* that is dedicated specifically to the virtue of humility, a thorough understanding of this virtue will take us well beyond the six articles that comprise this question. Aquinas paints a picture of humility that is rich and multi-dimensional. Analyzing this picture will advance our efforts to address the concerns raised in the previous chapter and articulate an account of humility that captures humility’s potential to contribute to liberative aims.

In his discussion of humility, Aquinas highlights three important aspects: first, he defines humility in terms of the way it serves to moderate and restrain a particular kind of desire; second, he defines humility as one part of a two-fold virtue and in doing so articulates a strong relationship between humility and its partner in virtue, magnanimity; and finally, Aquinas claims that humility is a virtue by which one consistently subjects oneself rightly to God and to other human beings. The final three chapters of this dissertation examine each of these aspects in turn. In the process, they illuminate the relationship between humility and other key virtues. Shedding light on these interrelationships leads to a deeper understanding of the way virtuous humility operates.

This chapter brings into focus the relationship between humility and temperance, which has traditionally been regarded as one of the four cardinal virtues. Aquinas claims that humility shares certain features with temperance as a moderator of desire. Humility is defined in relation to temperance – as a “potential part” of temperance. This chapter explores the nature of that relationship and further examines humility’s function as a moderator of desire. At least part of the concern with humility, as voiced in the previous chapter, is that humility arguably leads to a lackluster pursuit of great things. Nietzsche argues that humility detracts from genuine self-realization and actualization. Hume
claims that humility is not useful because it does not contribute to the happiness of oneself or others. As we will see in this chapter, it is possible to think more subtly about humility’s moderating function, drawing on the insight of Aquinas, but also pushing some of his ideas further than explicitly articulated in the Summa. In this way, we can find creative ways to address serious concerns.

Aquinas writes that humility restrains “the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason.”¹ Humility is linked to temperance, according to Aquinas, because of its mode of restraint. This chapter examines the distinctive desire that humility is responsible for restraining, namely, unreasonable hope for “great things” and “excellence.” The analysis entails an exploration of the various “extremes” relative to the “mean” that is expressed in virtuous humility. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the way in which humility, as defined by Aquinas, could be re-conceived somewhat in a way that reflects more adequately the constitutively relational nature of the humble moral agent.

Humility as a Potential Part of Temperance

In his categorization of the virtues Aquinas takes great pains to specify the distinguishing features of each of the many virtues he discusses. Part of the way he draws distinctions between different virtues is by relating each of them, in a different way, to a principal, or cardinal, virtue, which is responsible for perfecting a main power of the soul.² That is, Aquinas characterizes certain virtues as “parts” of other, more comprehensive virtues.³ The parts of a virtue are three in kind, namely, integral,

---

¹ ST II-II 161.1 ad 3.

² ST I-II 61.2 states: “...there are four subjects of [moral virtue]: viz., the power which is rational in its essence, and this is perfected by Prudence; and that which is rational by participation and is threefold, the will, subject of Justice, the concupiscible faculty, subject of Temperance, and the irascible faculty, subject of Fortitude.”

³ ST II-II 48.1.
subjective, and potential. Integral parts of a cardinal virtue are those important, but delimited traits that we can think of as building blocks of the cardinal virtue, much like a “wall, roof, and foundation are parts of a house.”

Subjective parts of a cardinal virtue are “species” that can be differentiated in accordance with their particular objects. For example, sobriety, which is about regulating one’s desires for alcoholic beverages, is a species of the virtue of temperance, which concerns more inclusively the moderation of one’s desires for and enjoyment of sensory pleasures associated with food, drink, and sexual relations. Potential parts of a cardinal virtue are those that are connected to it by way of sharing certain features or dealing with objects that are similar to, but not exactly the same as, the objects with which the cardinal virtue is centrally concerned. Thomas writes, “the potential parts of a virtue are the virtues connected with it, which are directed to certain secondary acts or matters, not having, as it were, the whole power of the principal virtue.”

In Aquinas’s view, humility is best understood as a potential part of the virtue of temperance. As a potential part, humility shares with the cardinal virtue certain features. Aquinas explains,

Now the mode of temperance, whence it chiefly derives its praise, is the restraint or suppression of the impetuosity of a passion. Hence whatever virtues restrain or suppress, and the actions which moderate the impetuosity of the emotions, are reckoned parts of temperance. Now … humility suppress[es] the movement of hope, which is the movement of a spirit aiming at great things. Wherefore, … humility is accounted a part of temperance.

---

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 ST II-II 161.4.
Characterizing humility as a potential, rather than an integral or subjective, part of temperance entails that humility is not necessary for the proper functioning of temperance. However, temperance is necessary for the proper functioning of humility.

Temperance is the chief virtue by which one acquires the disposition to experience well-ordered appetitive responses to goods that bring pleasure at the most basic level and insure the preservation of individual life and species. Aquinas claims that our desires for goods such as food, drink, and sexual relations can be especially difficult to moderate and to bring into line with reason or with the demands of divine law because they reflect such intense biological drives. He writes, “…moderation … deserves praise principally in pleasures of touch, with which temperance is concerned, both because these pleasures are most natural to us, so that it is more difficult to abstain from them, and to control the desire for them, and because their objects are more necessary to the present life…” Temperance is so important because it provides the stable ground upon which one can then go on to cultivate habits of moderation relative to other kinds of desire. In short, it is only on the basis of considerable development of temperance that humility is even possible.

---

7 *ST II-II 141.7.*

8 With regard to temperance and its parts, we are chiefly concerned with desires associated with the concupiscible power, i.e., the power to seek sensible objects that are perceived straightforwardly as good or pleasant, and to retreat from sensible objects that are perceived as evil or harmful. However, humility regulates hope, which is associated with the irascible power. The latter is concerned with the power to overcome obstacles that block the attainment of pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Aquinas discusses the different passions of the human soul in the *ST I-II* qq. 22-48. See also: Kevin White, “The Passions of the Soul,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, edited by Stephen Pope (Washington D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2002) 103-115; and Diana Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious Ethical Inquiry* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2009).

9 This relationship of dependence between cardinal, or principal, virtues and their respective parts is in large part what makes them cardinal, or principal, virtues in the first place. Bonnie Kent writes of this relationship in reference to justice and generosity. She writes, “… a person cannot have the virtue of generosity without justice. (If I do not have a stable disposition to understand and give people what I owe them, how would I have a stable disposition to give them more than I owe?) In contrast, a person might indeed have the virtue of justice without
It is primarily the feature of restraint that links humility to the virtue of temperance. A closer look at Aquinas’s reflection on temperance, however, reveals that we need to think more subtly about the connection between temperance, humility, and restraint. One of the advantages to exploring what humility and temperance have in common is that it allows us to address some of the concerns broached in the previous chapter. Given concerns about the way in which humility might thwart a person’s striving for and pursuit of greatness, it is best if we can articulate a more nuanced conception of the moderating function of both humility and temperance. If we understand temperance and humility in terms of restraint only, we overlook their complexity.

In her analysis of Aquinas’s understanding of temperance, Diana Cates urges caution lest we misinterpret Aquinas’s view. She writes, “It sometimes seems that, for Thomas, temperance is a habit of undergoing tightly-reined movements of the appetite while feeling the accompanying pleasure of being ‘in control.’ There are good reasons, however, for questioning the adequacy of this reading (and for distinguishing Thomas’s account from Puritan accounts of temperance).”

Instead of viewing Aquinas as defining temperance primarily as a tendency to “restrict” and “repress” certain intensely pleasing appetitive movements, Cates argues that Thomas’s account of temperance is about experiencing “appropriate” desires and pleasures. According to Cates, “Thomistic temperance is best construed as a habit of being consistently moved and pleased in a beautiful and honorable manner by attractive objects of sense experience.

generosity…. Thomas explains that the virtue of justice might eventually be enhanced by the related virtue of generosity, but generosity is only a ‘potential’ part of justice, not a species of justice or an ‘integral’ part of it.” See: Bonnie Kent, “Habits and Virtues,” in The Ethics of Aquinas, edited by Stephen Pope (Washington D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2002) 124.


11 Ibid.
Again, it is not primarily a defensive habit of controlling one’s appetites.”12 Thomistic temperance is about experiencing “desire and pleasure … in the mode of reflective awareness and rational governance.”13 When Aquinas links humility to the virtue of temperance on account of their shared mode, it is therefore truer to his own understanding of the cardinal virtue of temperance to claim that the mode they share is not simply the mode of restraint but is rather this mode of “reflective awareness and rational governance.”

Cates explains further that part of the reason Aquinas can come across as being on the defensive relative to desires and pleasures is that he wants to stress the critical importance of having generally well-ordered appetites. As Cates describes it,

…if one’s appetites become disordered – if one repeatedly succumbs to powerful impulses to touch sensibles in pleasing but detrimental ways – then one becomes disposed to seek what is bad under the impression that it is good. When this happens, one loses the ability to discern this distortion in one’s vision and love of the good. One thus sinks ever deeper into confusion and compulsion.14

Just as Aquinas thinks it necessary to “urge vigilance”15 when it comes to the desires and pleasures of touch, he also has good reason to emphasize the need to restrain impetuous hopes for excellence because of the negative impact such hopes can have on the moral life.16 Exploring the relationship between humility and temperance encourages us to view humility as a virtue that concerns the smooth regulation of our desires rather than simply restraint. As a virtue in the Thomistic and Aristotelian sense, humility represents the mean between extremes. An over-emphasis on restraint can limit our ability to see

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 323.
16 This will be further explored in the next section when we examine the particular vices associated with humility.
that one can err not only in the direction of excessive or unrestrained hope but also in the
direction of insufficient hope.

Humility as a Moderator of Desire

Humility is the virtue responsible for regulating the hope that one can experience
when one aims at “great things” that are still in the future. Hope is a specific kind of
desire. It involves the spirited overcoming of an obstacle or a difficulty in attaining
something desirable.17 Hope is a rather complex desire. We are drawn toward a
possibility (because it is good) and, at the same time, we are repelled by it (because
attaining it will likely be difficult). Cates elucidates,

…the object appears to the animal to be attainable – with considerable effort.
Inasmuch as the animal apprehends the object in question as a good, it tends
toward the object. Inasmuch as the animal apprehends the object as so good that it
is worth overcoming obstacles to attain, the animal undergoes a specifically
irascible motion. It becomes energized and tends toward the object despite the
struggle involved. The struggle itself usually appears under the aspect of evil; it is
a source of pain for the animal.18

Although he is not explicit about this, the kind of hope that humility regulates is a hope
that is experienced in a distinctively human way. Such hope is predicated partly on
intellectual judgments (and also, for religious believers, faith). The object of hope is
something that one judges to be “great” because, one believes, it makes a positive
contribution to one’s excellence. It promises to improve the quality of one’s life and
community. The “great things” that we think will contribute to our excellence are
generally things that will take a significant amount of effort to attain. Although it will be

17 The passions associated with the irascible faculty of our sensory appetite are those
experienced in relation to complex objects. The irascible appetite differs from the concupiscible
appetite which tends “simply” toward a suitable (good) object or “simply” away from an
unsuitable (evil) object. See ST I-II 23; and Cates, Aquinas on the Emotions, p. 149.

18 Cates, Aquinas on the Emotions, p. 149-50.
a painful struggle to attain them, we strive anyway. We are often “invigorated” by the challenge that such a pursuit presents.

The mixed quality of hope makes us prone to veer off course and depart from right reason’s guidance. At every step along the way toward our desired end there is the opportunity to misunderstand the nature of the difficulty, to become so wrapped up in the challenge that we fail to examine whether or not the good we seek is still attainable, appropriate, or worth the effort, or to turn away too soon from a legitimate good in response to a seemingly insurmountable challenge. The purpose of the virtue of humility is to keep us on course by ensuring (in conjunction with other traits) that our desires for the “great things” that manifest excellence are well-considered.

For Aquinas, humble desires are oriented toward objects that signify genuine excellence and are also possible for us to attain, given the particulars of our lives and social situations. Human beings can aim at a number of different kinds of excellence. “Excellence” may signify: 1) the basic capabilities that generally come with being human and are the ground of human dignity, including the capacity to learn a morality and to participate in moral discourse; 2) the attainment of intellectual or moral goods or virtues;19 3) the attainment of non-moral goods such as technical skills or otherwise helpful and generally pleasing qualities; 4) social status, insofar as such status reflects a rather widely-shared judgment that someone has attained considerable intellectual and moral virtue; 5) social status, insofar as such status reflects a rather widely-held judgment that someone has attained a considerable amount of skill or other good qualities; and 6) a blend of any of the above.

---

19 As Chapter 2 demonstrates, which traits and what degree of actualization counts as “excellent” can and does vary. Different people can regard different traits as virtues or vices in different contexts.
Keeping these distinctions in mind is important for thinking clearly about the “great things” one ought to hope for in light of an accurate understanding of who one is. These distinctions remind us that some of the things we aim for are excellent in a non-moral sense. That is, they are not directly concerned with the cultivation of moral character and the creation of a community in which good character prevails. They are concerned, instead, with qualities or skills that are valued for various other reasons. A surgeon, for example, might be excellent in the practice of surgery, and we might value this excellence highly for its life-saving effects. However, the fact that a surgeon is good at her craft does not necessarily entail that she is also an excellent moral agent, or that her desires for excellence are morally praiseworthy. Although the line between the non-moral and the moral can be hard to delineate, especially within a Thomistic ethical framework, humility is understood by Aquinas to be concerned primarily with the well-reasoned pursuit of genuine happiness and the common good, which are attained chiefly in and through the coordinated, collective pursuit of moral virtue. Saving lives is of course extremely valuable, but it is valuable because life is foundational for the vigorous pursuit of something beyond mere existence, namely, moral goodness. The proper pursuit of excellence thus requires that one understand the different meanings and valuations of excellence.

Aquinas argues that proper humility entails following the guidance of reason. Under the guidance of reason individuals will have an accurate grasp of who they are, in relation to others, and what is possible for them, at a given time and also in the future, under a variety of conditions. They will hope for “great things” that reflect careful consideration of the content of human happiness. For Christians, Aquinas posits an “infused” form of humility, namely, one that is predicated not only on good intellectual judgment, but also on the gift of faith. He does not distinguish methodically between these two different forms of humility, but it is important to keep this distinction in mind. Bonnie Kent reminds us that
...the *Summa* posits a whole species of moral and intellectual virtues ...which are infused by God along with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. When Thomas refers to moral and intellectual virtues, he might therefore be referring either to naturally acquired virtues or to virtues that Christians possess due to God’s grace.\(^{20}\)

Naturally acquired humility is cultivated by choosing to bring one’s desires into order relative to the rule of reason. It is about cultivating the right kind of hope for the right kinds of things, as a rational human being ought. It is a matter of consistently and reliably taking into account one’s capabilities as a human being and a particular individual, so that one can pursue the kind of excellence that is possible in this mortal life. The rule that guides infused humility will be informed by an understanding of God and of ultimate human perfection and happiness being found in the life to come. The distinction is important because humility will look different depending on the highest rule that is guiding it.

Aquinas insists that humility is best understood as a moral virtue, as opposed to a theological virtue.\(^{21}\) He thereby suggests that it is a virtue that can be elevated by the power of grace which is communicated with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, but it is not itself a theological virtue. This is a notoriously difficult distinction to sort out in his thinking on humility. The problem lies in the fact that Aquinas seems to think of humility primarily in its *infused* form. He writes that human beings develop humility “first and chiefly, by a gift of grace” and secondarily “by human effort.”\(^{22}\) Keeping the distinction clear is important however, especially if we want to understand

---

\(^{20}\) Bonnie Kent, “Habits and Virtues,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, edited by Stephen Pope (Washington D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2002) 121. Viewed in its entirety, Kent’s article provides a clear and helpful explanation of the distinction between naturally acquired moral virtues and infused virtues, and highlights the importance of the infused virtues for a thoroughly Thomistic understanding of virtue.

\(^{21}\) *ST* II-II 161.4 ad 1.

\(^{22}\) *ST* 161.6 ad 2.
how humility functions as an acquired moral virtue that will make a valuable contribution to the lives of diverse human beings, most of whom do not identify as Christians.

To clarify what it means to conceive of humility as the virtue that moderates one’s desires for various sorts of excellence, it is helpful to examine the vices that are opposed to the virtue of humility. Such a consideration provides a basis on which we can then analyze further humility’s distinctive features.

**Humility, Pride, and Pusillanimity**

If to be humble is to follow the guidance of reason, or reason informed by faith, in the pursuit of “great things,” what does it look like to go wrong in that pursuit? The primary vice opposed to humility is pride. Pride signifies a lack of humility; it is thus, in a sense, a vice of deficiency. Yet it also signifies an excess of a certain desire. Pride is “the appetite for excellence in excess of right reason.” Aquinas states that human beings appropriately desire excellence: it “is natural for … everything to seek in desired goods the perfection that consists of a certain excellence.” It is morally right to seek “excellence in accord with the rule of reason,” but it is sinful to “exceed the proper measure in the desire for excellence.”

Paul Weithman clarifies that Aquinas distinguishes the desire for excellence from other kinds of desire by noting that “excellentia or one’s own excellence is not itself an object of desire, but is one component – the formal component – of such an object.”

---

23 *ST II-II 162.1 ad 2*. Aquinas frequently writes that humility is guided by the “rule of reason” without further clarifying the distinction between the rule of natural reason and that of reason informed by faith.

24 *De Malo* 8.2.

25 Ibid.

26 Paul Weithman, “Thomistic Pride and Liberal Vice,” *The Thomist* 60 (1996) 241-274, sec.III. Article accessed via the web at: http://www.thomist.org. In *De Malo*, Aquinas writes, “Pride has its own matter if we understand by pride the formal character of its object … although this character can be in every kind of thing…” (*De Malo 8.2 ad 3*).
This means that we can desire a variety of different objects in our lives because we hope to realize a degree of excellence for ourselves by attaining them. The desire for our own excellence involves a desire for the kinds of things that we believe will help us to actualize some valuable potential and also to signify this actualization. Thus, as Weithman argues, “…if we are to ascribe to someone a desire for her own excellence, we must also be able to ascribe to her a desire to have good grounds for judging or believing that she is excellent by the standard she employs.” 27

Weithman’s analysis helps us to avoid an over-simplified understanding of pride as simply “excessive desire” for one’s own excellence. Prideful desires for our own excellence can exceed the rule of reason in different ways: we can make use of the wrong standards by which to judge ourselves excellent and thereby pursue excellence in the wrong things; we can misjudge the degree to which we have met either legitimate or illegitimate standards of excellence: and we can fail to understand the degree to which we alone are responsible and to be praised for having achieved such excellence.

We can get a better grasp of what it means for our desires for excellentia to exceed their proper order by looking at the different species of pride described by Aquinas in the *Summa*. Aquinas identifies four species of pride: “boasting of what one has not;” 28 thinking that one has acquired excellence on one’s own instead of recognizing that one’s excellence has come from above (from God); believing that one has merited the excellence bestowed from above even though one has not; and “despising” others out of a desire to appear to be “the exclusive possessor” of what one has, or to be “singularly conspicuous.” 29

---

27 Weithman, “Thomistic Pride,” sec II.

28 *ST* II-II 162.4.

29 Ibid.
According to Aquinas, boasting consists in ascribing to oneself something greater than one is or has. One of the examples of pride used in *De Malo* captures boasting well. He writes, “…we do not impute pride to a bishop if he happens to perform functions belonging to his excellent state, but we would impute pride to an ordinary priest if he were to attempt to perform functions reserved to a bishop.”\(^{30}\) In this example the priest is performing the functions of his superior. He thereby ascribes to himself the benefits and responsibilities, and also the social status,\(^{31}\) associated with the higher degree of excellence that comes with the bishop’s position. He presumes himself to have a higher degree of excellence than he actually has. What is important to emphasize in this example of boasting is that the desire for excellence itself is not the problem, but the *presumptuousness* associated with the ordinary priest’s desire. In boasting, he fails to grasp the appropriate standards by which to judge himself well.\(^{32}\) If and when the priest becomes a bishop, the standards for excellence that apply to bishops will apply to him, but not before that point. It is not necessarily prideful to hope for greater things in the future. In performing his specific duties well, a priest can aim to show his superiors that he has the character necessary for becoming an excellent bishop, but to grant himself prematurely the higher degree of excellence associated with the prelate’s office is to display an inordinate desire for excellence.

\(^{30}\) *De Malo* 8.2.

\(^{31}\) Here we see the blending of different dimensions of excellence. The bishop’s higher ecclesiastical position grants him greater degrees of excellence relative to the priest because he has more responsibility for the care of the community, he has, arguably, attained greater levels of intellectual and moral virtue, and his position is higher in the hierarchy. It is important to remember that in medieval European societies wealth and power as such were collectively recognized as genuine excellences that deserved recognition and respect.

\(^{32}\) One possible reason for this is that one has accepted subjective standards rather than objective standards set by the institution of which one is a part. One judges oneself to be a better judge of one’s own level of excellence and relies on that judgment rather than on the one offered by the institution. Of course, sometimes relying on one’s subjective judgment is justified, particularly if one has otherwise judged the institution’s standards to be unfair.
In light of the difficulty involved in attaining objects we believe will make a contribution to our excellence, it can be tempting to try to take a short-cut through the challenges by presuming to possess already what we hope to attain. It is sometimes easier to believe falsely that we have/are what we do/are not. Calling attention to the problem of boasting also brings to light another problem we can encounter in the pursuit of excellence: without humility to moderate our hope for future excellence, we can become so eager to get to the next best thing for ourselves that we fail to focus our energy on doing what it takes to excel in our present positions. In doing so, we likely rob ourselves of valuable, invigorating, and challenging experiences and decrease the likelihood that we will excel at the next level because we have sought something for which we are not adequately prepared.

The next two species of pride demonstrate further how inordinate desires for our own excellence can lead to false beliefs about the levels of excellence we have achieved. We think we have acquired something on our own that came from sources beyond ourselves or we somehow believe ourselves to be worthy of social affirmation that is not, in fact, based on anything we have done – at least, not on anything we have done apart from the significant aid of others. Weithman’s Thomistic account describes the process this way: when a person claims to have acquired a certain degree of excellence on her own without recognizing that such excellence came from God, she...

...wants to judge herself to be excellent, she believes that achieving the goods in question on her own would be good grounds for that judgment, and she so wants to be excellent that she comes to believe she really has attained those goods on her own. Her believing that she has done so is thus the way in which the strength of her appetite shows itself.\(^{33}\)

---

\(^{33}\) Weithman, “Thomistic Pride,” sec. II.
Aquinas does not offer a particular example of these manifestations of pride. He claims that these two species of pride “pertain to ingratitude” because they prevent individuals from recognizing the gifts they have received from others, particularly from God.

It is possible to see the danger of this sort of pride also in a context outside of Christian faith or, more specifically, the monastery. Reflection on the nature of relational identity makes clear that anyone who hopes to secure excellence of any sort without the help of others is operating with a distorted picture of what excellence is and of how it is to be achieved. Under the influence of pride, one risks navigating through life with a distorted self-understanding that will impede one’s ability to thrive and to understand what that excellence entitles one to. It is worth noting that the goal is not to undermine the concept of agency or individual responsibility for achievements that are the results of choices made and actions taken by a particular moral agent. Rather, the goal is to stress the importance of tempering one’s desires for excellence lest one begin to believe that excellence, when it is attained, will be due solely or primarily to one’s own effort and it will reflect well upon the self in a way that sets the self apart from others.

In light of our basic relational identity we should also be cautious about the way we assign a higher level of excellence to things that individuals achieve all on their own and begin to think anew about the way that proper pride involves appreciating and valuing the excellence one has achieved in the context of both intimate and more extended social relationships. A proper pursuit of excellence entails a disposition to seek out, accept, and acknowledge assistance received from others. If we assume that true excellence comes primarily from our own initiative and our own doing, we have clearly adopted the wrong standard of excellence in light of which to evaluate ourselves. According to this distorted standard, the pursuit of excellence becomes equated with a

---

34 ST II-II 162.4 ad 3.
kind of individualism that fails to accord with an accurate picture of what it means to be a relational human being.35

The last species of pride discussed by Aquinas emerges when people attempt to secure a degree of excellence by acquiring superiority over others and by laying such a claim to their own excellence that they attempt to secure it for themselves only—hoarding it, if you will. The temptation here is partly to stand above others in one’s own mind; but the temptation is also to be regarded by other people as exceptional and uniquely wonderful. By equating excellence with superiority, one puts oneself in a distinctive kind of relationship with others. From this perspective, a person believes herself to be excellent only if she measures herself competitively against others and comes out winning. The result is that she ends up “despising others” since they become threats to her own status. Of course, there are certain degrees of excellence that can be attained only in competition with others. During the Olympic games, only those whose performances are the best earn a gold medal. Aiming to be “singularly conspicuous” in this case could still be evident in those who judge themselves to be superior because they believe that earning a gold medal means that they are the only true athletes in the competition. Aquinas argues that human beings all hope for things that we think will contribute to our excellence. His discussion of pride exposes some of the ways that we can err in that pursuit. But pride is only one way that we can err in reference to our hopes for excellence. The vice opposed to humility in terms of excess, or “too much humility,” is the vice of pusillanimity, the vice associated with “smallness of soul.”36

35 This is likely why Statman’s characteristically modest person leaves a bit of a bad taste in the mouth. His excellent person is strongly tempted to treat others as morally inferior to himself because of his obvious superiority to them in other things. An attitude such as this is not consistent with an awareness of our deeply relational nature and the fact that other human beings are continually making valuable contributions to our own excellence (or are making attaining excellence more difficult).

36 De Malo 8.2; ST II-II 133; ST II-II 161.2 ad 2; ST II-II 162.1 ad 1.
Unfortunately, Aquinas does not focus much of his attention on pusillanimity as a vice directly opposed to humility. According to his understanding, humility is mostly concerned with “suppressing [excessive] hope or confidence in self.”\textsuperscript{37} For Aquinas, deficient humility in the form of pride is a far more common and dangerous problem than excessive humility. In fact, the vice of excessive humility is so rare that Aquinas does not even assign to it its own distinctive name. He claims that “the vice opposed to pride by default is \textit{akin} to the vice of pusillanimity, which is opposed by default to magnanimity.”\textsuperscript{38} We must postpone a detailed exploration of the connection between humility and magnanimity until the next chapter. For now, however, it is appropriate to explore the vice of pusillanimity as it is expressed in a person’s being drawn toward or “attached” to things that are beneath what is “becoming” to him or her.\textsuperscript{39} This sort of pusillanimity “makes a man fall short of what is proportionate to his power, by refusing to tend to that which is commensurate thereto.”\textsuperscript{40} As a vice opposed to humility, pusillanimity emerges when the reason for that refusal is a failure to be appropriately drawn toward what is genuinely good and worth pursuing.\textsuperscript{41} This vice may be more prevalent than Aquinas assumed. In light of our previous reflection on humility and pride we are poised to look more closely at pusillanimity than Aquinas does.

Pusillanimity is a habit that disposes people to experience unduly weak desires for things that are reasonably regarded as worthwhile. The problem with pusillanimity is that

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{ST} II-II 161.2 ad 3.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{ST} II-II 162.1 ad 3 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{ST} II-II 133.1.

\textsuperscript{41} This is opposed to pusillanimity as the vice opposed to magnanimity which is manifested in a kind of “faint-heartedness” which is the result of a lack of courage to do what it takes to achieve such goods. (\textit{ST} II-II 133.1 ad 2)
it inhibits people from pursuing and achieving levels of excellence that would be appropriate and good for them to pursue. A lack of appropriate levels of desire for excellence can also lead to the denial of gifts, strengths, or achievements that have already been attained, some of which effectively make a claim on a person to be acknowledged and further realized.

To understand what it means for a person to be drawn toward a lesser form of excellence than is appropriate to her it is helpful to explore the concept of “false-consciousness.” Although philosophical reflection on the problem of “false-consciousness” emerged centuries after Aquinas’ time, there are moments in his thinking where he acknowledges something analogous to it. For example, in his definition of hatred, Aquinas ponders the question of the possibility of self-hatred and claims that self-hatred occurs “accidentally” when a person pursues, as good, things that are actually evil or when a person lives a life that does not reflect an accurate understanding of who she is as a human being. For Aquinas this is manifested, for example, when “some men account themselves as being principally that which they are in their material and sensitive nature. Wherefore they love themselves according to what they take themselves to be, while they hate that which they really are, by desiring that which is contrary to reason.”

Self-hatred at this level consists in working against one’s own interests because of an inaccurate understanding of what is genuinely good for oneself. For Aquinas this could occur in a number of ways. It could be present in a person’s focus on the finite goods of this life and a corresponding neglect of the good of eternal life in friendship with God. It could be present in cases of intemperance where an individual is slavishly drawn toward pleasurable sensations. As examples of self-hatred, however these would have to be more than simple intemperance or improper reasoning regarding one’s proper

---

42 ST I-II 29.4.
end. Hatred, according to Aquinas is caused by the apprehension of something as “evil” and as “repugnant and hurtful.” Self-hatred must involve more than simply failing to follow the proper rule of reason, it involves apprehending something that is, objectively, good for one, as evil, repugnant, or hurtful. In recoiling from such objects one actively works against one’s own flourishing.

Coming to hate something in or about the self that one ought to love is the result of a kind of false-awareness or improper self-understanding. What is interesting about Aquinas’s characterization of self-hatred is that he thinks this problem is linked more to pride than to pusillanimity. He writes, “even pusillanimity may in some way be the result of pride: when, to wit, a man clings too much to his own opinion, whereby he thinks himself incompetent for those things for which he is competent.”43 The underlying problem, suggests Aquinas, is trusting too much in one’s own opinion and estimate of oneself. Part of the solution would seem to involve looking beyond oneself to gain insight from others, and thereby forming a more accurate and objective understanding of what is possible.

Contemporary accounts of the problem of false-consciousness indicate that self-hatred can be more complex than Aquinas describes. Aquinas is not concerned to investigate how interests of power work to facilitate the construction and maintenance of certain kinds of false-consciousness in order to keep hegemonic systems and values in place. He does not reflect on the way that social forces work on individuals and on entire groups of people to encourage them to believe that they are capable of and deserve significantly less than they actually are and do. This kind of false-consciousness can be understood as a distinctive kind of pusillanimity, one that is not rooted in pride.

According to John Jost, false-consciousness is defined as “the holding of false beliefs that

43 ST II-II 133.1 ad 3.
are contrary to one’s social interest and which thereby contribute to the disadvantaged position of the self or the group.”\textsuperscript{44} False-consciousness inhibits people from cultivating appropriate desires for their own happiness. This is because it inhibits their ability to see the extent to which a hegemonic society limits their opportunities for “great things” such as “the achievement of life satisfaction, equality of opportunity, freedom from oppression, recognition of injustice, and participation in progressive social change.”\textsuperscript{45} Because of the influence of false-consciousness, those in subjugated, non-dominant, groups often are at higher risk for selling themselves too short by accepting the limited options available to them.

Feminists Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter offer a glimpse of what pusillanimity in the form of false-consciousness can look like.\textsuperscript{46} They present a case-study of a growing South African conservative Christian women’s movement called the Worthy Women’s Conference (WWC). The WWC promotes the patriarchal family structure as God’s intended family structure and, therefore, the key to marital and familial success and happiness. According to Nadar and Potgieter’s analysis, the WWC advocates the “formenist” position that men are naturally superior leaders and that wives ought to submit to their husbands’ leadership in the household. Furthermore the WWC suggests that such submission is actually empowering and liberating for women because it is the


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 401.

\textsuperscript{46} Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, “Liberated Through Submission?: The Worthy Women’s Conference as a Case Study of Formenism,” \textit{Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion} 26.2 (2010), 141-151. It is worth noting that to accept Nadar and Potgieter’s analysis requires accepting certain kinds of (debatable) feminist assumptions such as the assumption that the “formenist discourse” of the WWC “put’s women’s lives at risk,” “is contradictory,” and “is dangerous” because it promotes and supports the maintenance of patriarchal (inherently unequal) family structures that deprive women of the rights they should have as human beings (144).
living out of the divine plan for marriage in which men’s and women’s different roles are
designed to complement each other.⁴⁷

The problem with this kind of position and the discourse that supports it,
according to Nadar and Potgieter, is that women end up adopting and endorsing a mode
of being that works against them in various ways – the worst of which is seen in
situations of domestic violence. When excellence, in this case in the form of living up to
God’s ideal for women, is tied to submission to one’s husband, even in cases where he is
abusive, the solution is to be more submissive in order to become more like the ideal.
This can prevent some women from conceiving of and pursuing a new life course that is
not characterized by living in fear of physical and/or psychological violence. Importantly,
what this example shows in reference to pusillanimity is that what prevents some women
in this situation from being freed from harm is not necessarily or simply a lack of
courage. It is that they desire a certain kind of excellence for themselves that arguably
does not actually promote their own well-being and happiness. Indeed, it does not
promote the well-being of their husbands, either, as it implicitly encourages abusive men
to continue their abuse and even value it as a sign of God-given superiority. The
submissive woman is in fact vulnerable to the worst sort of long-term personal
diminishment, which is predicated on the belief that she ought not openly and honestly to
challenge the authority of her husband or otherwise speak up for herself.

Identifying the right kinds of excellence to pursue takes careful consideration. The
task is even more complicated when social conditions are such that it becomes difficult to
develop an accurate understanding of who one is. Aquinas expresses concern about the
ways that pusillanimity might lead an embodied spiritual person to fail to live a life in

⁴⁷ Sex complementarity is often used as an alternative to sex equality as a vision that
stresses the significant value of women while not making the claim that men and women are
essentially equal or exactly the same.
pursuit of the spiritual excellences of which he is capable.\(^{48}\) Because Aquinas believes the highest aim for human beings is to seek and experience the spiritual excellence of friendship with God (at a super-natural level), along with a life of acquired virtue and contemplation (at a natural level), any vice that contributes to a person’s failure to develop the spiritual part of himself is a particularly dangerous vice. An awareness of the problem of false-consciousness allows us to deepen our understanding of the vice of pusillanimity.

Another possible manifestation of pusillanimity becomes evident when we pause to consider the opposite extreme of pride as expressed in the desire to attain superiority by standing out or by being “singularly conspicuous.” Pusillanimity can take the form of a person’s lack of a desire to be noticed by others or by a desire to be totally inconspicuous. The desire to “blend in” can result in a person’s failure to focus any attention on herself and on her gifts, strengths of character, and abilities and thus fail to develop them in order to benefit herself or others. For much of its history, humility has been associated with this kind of lack of attention to oneself. The assumption has been that humility requires the denial of strengths and gifts, because to acknowledge them or call attention to them at all is to be prideful. It involves flaunting one’s talents or showing off. Recognizing that to deny such strengths and gifts is more akin to the vice of pusillanimity helps to clear humility of such an association.

Aquinas is careful to point out that humility is not about ignoring or denying one’s strengths. He writes,

\[
\text{it is a sign of humility if a man does not think too much of himself, through observing his own faults; but if a man contemns the good things he has received from God, this, far from being proof of humility, shows him to be ungrateful: and from such like contempt results sloth \ldots. Accordingly, we ought to think much of}
\]

\(^{48}\) ST II-II 161.1 ad 1.
the goods of others, in such a way as not to disparage those we have received ourselves, because if we did they would give us sorrow.\footnote{\textit{ST} II-II 35.2 ad 3.}

To deny the gifts one has been given is not only indicative of pusillanimity, but it may also lead to the sin of sloth (\textit{acedia}).

Pusillanimity and the sin of sloth are related, but distinct. Acedia is the result of being pained (experiencing sorrow and consenting to it) by the thought of divine goodness that arises partly from an awareness of one’s gifts. The reason for the sorrow is that gifts implicitly put a demand upon a person, namely, the demand to cultivate them and put them to good use, and this in turn generally requires that a person forego other avenues of life with which she has become familiar. It often requires that a person forego the enjoyment of pleasures to which she has become attached. Pusillanimity, on the other hand, brings to mind an avoidance that is driven by an unwillingness to be particularly special in some way. It is more like a vicious form of shyness or lack of self-awareness.\footnote{This discussion leads me to think of Immanuel Kant and his urging his readers to “know themselves.” Kant identifies the problem as a lack of courage. What this reflection on pusillanimity shows is that there is a difference between the fear one feels in regard to the task of self-knowledge (and the potential of exposure before others) and the absence or insufficient amount of the desire for self-knowledge.}

An extreme shyness can give rise to a desire to not stand out in a crowd, partly because one cannot imagine what one would do if one were suddenly to become a focus of others’ attention. It does not occur to one to think that one has something—anything—important to offer.

Pusillanimity as excessive humility is not rooted in fear, but is more likely rooted in a feeling of “insignificance” that comes from failing to acquire an appropriate understanding of one’s genuine value. Perhaps that is too strong: it is not that the pusillanimous person thinks bad thoughts about himself, judging himself to be of no account; rather, he suffers from a kind of apathy, a lack of drive. The person who is
“weak in spirit” has no real desire to see and explore what his gifts are. He has little passion for life and is instead happy to just get by. This sort of pusillanimity brings to mind a person who does not seek any kind of excellence, a person who goes through life feeling no pull to self-improvement, no desire to become his or her own person and to make distinctive contributions to the society in which he or she lives.

Aquinas does not discuss the vice of pusillanimity at length. When he does mention it, he implies that it might be simply a different manifestation of pride. He suspects that a person who appears to think little of himself and his life possibilities is in some strange way calling attention to himself or setting himself apart from others. What we have done so far is to deepen our understanding of this vice so that we can think anew about the ways we can indeed err in terms of deficiency when it comes to our desires for the pursuit of excellence.

What distinguishes humility from other virtues, according to Aquinas, is its affiliation with the virtue of temperance and the way that it moderates our hope for great things that we believe will make us excellent and well-respected in our community. Looking at the extremes associated with humility gives us a better sense of humility’s distinctive features. Humility helps to rein in our desires lest they lead us to see forms of excellence that are not there or to seek excellence in the wrong things (i.e., material goods or the opinions of others, particularly where these opinions have no basis in human dignity or moral excellence or socially beneficial non-moral excellence) or in the wrong ways (i.e., by excessively trying to “go it alone” or by clinging to superiority or status).

Because humility is about having the right kind of desires for excellence it is responsible

---

51 This is true of many other thinkers as well, including those mentioned in the previous chapter. Hume, Spinoza, and Nietzsche believe that many cases of humility are rooted in prideful desires to be spiritually better than others.
also for ensuring that one does not rein those desires in too much or fail to cultivate a basic passion for actualization.

Because humility is something more than simply a virtue of *restraint*, it would be inaccurate, according to this understanding of humility, to claim that humility by definition or necessarily inhibits the pursuit of great things, as some of its critics insist. There is much more to explore, however. Because humility is tasked with moderating hope, which Aquinas defines as an irascible (or spirited) emotion, Aquinas claims that humility is actually one part of a two-fold virtue relative to excellence. Humility has a partner in virtue to which it is inextricably linked – the virtue of magnanimity.
CHAPTER FOUR: HUMILITY AND THE HOPE FOR EXCELLENCE (II)

Humility does not require the denial of one’s gifts or strengths, nor does it suppress legitimate and well-grounded desires for excellence.\(^1\) It does require bringing into consideration one’s limits, weaknesses, and faults in the formation of one’s self-understanding so that one can pursue the right kind of excellence in the right way. Humility is primarily a reality-check by way of restraint. This kind of restraint remains virtuous as long as it does not slide too far beyond the guidance of natural reason or faith.\(^2\) However, to aim for and achieve excellence also requires strength of mind and heart in the face of difficulty. It requires becoming aware of one’s potential, tending to one’s strengths and honing them, and nurturing one’s hope lest one prematurely give up on a possibility for excellence or resort to vicious means of acquiring it.

Aquinas recognizes the complexity of the desire for excellence. He argues that this desire actually needs to be moderated by a “two-fold” virtue, or two related virtues. We have already discussed one of these – the virtue of humility. The other is the virtue of magnanimity. He writes:

\[
\ldots for those appetitive movements which are a kind of impulse towards an object, there is need of a moderating and restraining moral virtue, while for those which are a kind of recoil, there is need, on the part of the appetite, of a moral virtue to strengthen it and urge it on. Wherefore a twofold virtue is necessary with regard to the difficult good: one, to temper and restrain the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately; and this belongs to the virtue of humility; and another to
\]

\(^1\) Claiming that humility does not necessarily require one to deny one’s strengths and gifts does not mean that there are not cases where individuals will hold back on developing them in the interests of letting others develop their own strengths.

\(^2\) As mentioned in the previous chapter, belief in the truth of Christian teachings brings believers beyond the guidance of natural reason as they take into account such teachings as those regarding original sin and salvation through God’s grace and as they strive to live in accordance with Divine law. For Aquinas, the whole truth about who we are (as having a two-fold end) and what we are capable of (with God) can be known only by faith. Faith tells the Christian that with God she is capable of anything that God also wills, but apart from God she is nothing (for apart from God she would not even exist).
strengthen the mind against despair, and urge it on to the pursuit of great things according to right reason: and this is magananimity.3

We cannot form a clear picture of the way that humility functions in the moral life without also looking at its partner-in-virtue, magnanimity.

Humility and magnanimity are the constitutive parts of a two-fold virtue responsible for regulating our hope for our own excellence; however, it is difficult to sort out the precise relationship between them. As Lisa Fullam stresses, as “two moral virtues with the same matter, both associated with the irascible appetite (though in different ways,) [and] opposite in mode, [humility and magnanimity] must overlap substantially.”4 Despite their close, and sometimes vexing, relationship, Aquinas takes great pains to distinguish these two virtues. This is because he believes that each does something different and each is necessary for attaining genuine excellence.

Magnanimity and Courage: Standing Firm in Hope

Hope is a complex movement of the appetite. We are drawn toward the good for which we hope, but attaining it will be difficult, given the obstacles that must be overcome. Irascible desires such as hope are “spirited” and can thus be invigorating, but the challenging nature of the object we desire is also likely to be a source of pain. The road to excellence is a rough one. It can be a struggle to achieve that for which we hope, and we are justified in feeling a degree of fear or repulsion in relation to the pain that we anticipate in that struggle.

Responding well to the evil that accompanies one’s desire for excellence requires magnanimity. According to Aquinas, magnanimity is the virtue responsible for “urging the mind to great things against despair.”5 It “strengthens” the soul in the face of

3 ST II-II 161.1 (Aquinas is not explicitly clear about whether he is thinking simply about right natural reason or if he is thinking about right reason informed by faith.).


5 ST II-II 162.1 ad 3.
difficulty “lest man, by despair, render himself unworthy of a good which was competent to him.” Magnanimity is about not letting go of a genuine possibility. It is associated with courage in that it “prepares the mind” and makes it “ready for aggression” in the face of obstacles that stand in the way of a desired end.

Courage is distinguished from other cardinal virtues because it perfects the irascible power of the soul by making possible “firmness of mind” in the face of obstacles. Maintaining a firm attachment to the good while facing a perceived evil requires both curbing fear and moderating daring. Insofar as fear causes one to withdraw from the evil one apprehends, courage is needed to keep that fear in the mean, lest it prevent one from attaining a genuine good. Insofar as daring involves moving toward an encounter with an evil, for the sake of a hoped-for good, courage is needed to moderate one’s aggression so that one does not stray beyond the limits of reason.

Magnanimity is like courage in that it keeps the mind attached to a perceived good. It strengthens hope by instilling confidence in the attainability of excellence, and this confidence enables one to stand firm in the face of difficulty. Magnanimity prevents one from unreasonably moving from hope to despair. Despair is an irascible emotion that one experiences when one ceases to believe that an object previously desired is attainable. Despair is contrary to hope because it “implies a movement of withdrawal” from something that one believes is no longer possible. Magnanimity’s function is to prevent us from despairing of a genuine possibility. It helps us to keep our “eyes on the

---

6 ST II-II 161.2 ad 3.
7 ST II-II 128.1.
8 ST II-II 123.2.
9 ST II-II 123.3.
10 ST I-II 40.4.
prize” so-to-speak. Keep in mind that Aquinas is concerned to isolate the distinctive features of the many virtues that perfect the powers of the human soul with regard to a variety of objects. His reflections on magnanimity serve to isolate its distinctive function, which is to strengthen the mind and prepare one to face the struggles ahead by confidently attaching one’s mind to the good of one’s excellence so that one can stand firm in hope and thereby ready oneself to “attack” the obstacles that are in one’s way.

Confidence is a “strong opinion that one will obtain a certain good.” Only with such an opinion will a person be able to withstand a difficult struggle. Confidence is associated with the “aggressive” dimension of courage, which is daring. Daring requires at least some underlying belief that one is stronger than the obstacles one faces. We do not generally pursue battles that we are sure to lose. Magnanimity is chiefly about strengthening one’s desires for excellence, but such strengthening is based in a prior self-understanding and, importantly, in a prior self-love. Not only does one need to know what is possible for oneself, but one needs also to feel as though one is worth the investment. Facing and enduring the struggles associated with achieving excellence require that one first have an awareness of one’s capabilities, strengths, and inherent value. Aquinas writes that confidence also comes from being aware of the kind of assistance one will likely receive from others. He writes,

confidence may denote the hope of having something, which hope we conceive through observing something either in oneself – for instance, through observing that he is healthy, a man is confident that he will live long; or in another, for instance, through observing that another is friendly to him and powerful, a man is confident that he will receive help from him.13

11 ST II-II 129.6.
12 ST II-II 123.6 ad 1.
13 ST II-II 129.6.
Through the power of observation, one comes to an awareness of one’s own value, of one’s strengths, and of what is possible for one. If one develops that sense of self in relation to others, by observing their particular strengths, and one has an accurate understanding of the degree to which one can count on them to be available to assist, one is better suited to strengthen one’s hope with confidence.\textsuperscript{14}

In confidence, a person knows that that to which she aspires, she can achieve. This knowledge is essential for remaining firm in the face of great difficulty. It bears repeating that the object of hope that is the domain of the virtues of humility and magnanimity is one’s own excellence. At least part of what makes this excellence so impressive is the fact that it is so difficult to realize, but it is also a good that it is worth the effort. Magnanimity wards off despair by calling to mind one’s inherent value, strengths, and potential for greater self-realization as well as one’s available means of support. The confident person says to her self: “this is who I am, this is what I am worth, this is what I can be, and I know how to get there.”

It is thus evident why Aquinas claims that magnanimity is tied to daring, for “hope is the cause of daring.”\textsuperscript{15} Responding well to the challenges associated with hoping for excellence requires managing the fear one feels in response to the challenges one will likely face. Fear can be a cause of unreasonable despair because of the way that it makes one withdraw from the difficult good. For this reason, Aquinas claims that “security,” in addition to confidence, belongs to magnanimity. Security, according to Aquinas, “denotes perfect freedom of the mind from fear.”\textsuperscript{16} Security diminishes fear,

\textsuperscript{14} As will be explored in more depth in the following chapter, humility is, in part, important for helping us to relate to others in such a way that we are better able to see their particular strengths, which highlights the important link between humility and magnanimity.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ST} II-II 129.8.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{ST} II-II 129.7.
but it is laudable only “when one puts care aside [in the manner that] one ought.”

Security is linked directly to courage because it has to do with fearing only those things that should be feared. Indirectly, however, Aquinas links security to magnanimity because of the way that responding fearfully toward things that one ought not to fear, rationally speaking, can lead one to give up hope of attaining a genuine possibility, giving rise to despair. Standing firm in the hope for excellence requires magnanimity, which is in turn bolstered by confidence and security.

In sum, Aquinas identifies magnanimity’s distinctive function as the virtue responsible for strengthening the mind in pursuit of great things. Aquinas further distinguishes magnanimity on account of its object, which we have been broadly referring to as “one’s own excellence.” In his discussion of the virtue of magnanimity however, Aquinas claims its proper object is “honors,” particularly “great honors.” In what follows, we will examine what he means by this and clarify the relationship between honors and excellence.

**Magnanimity, Honor, and Excellence**

According to Aquinas, “honor denotes a witnessing to a person’s excellence.” Honor is the means by which we signal our admiration of a person’s greatness. For human beings this recognition comes by way of certain culturally-determined forms of expression. Aquinas states that one cannot “bear witness” to another person’s excellence “…save by means of signs, either by words, as when one proclaims another’s excellence by word of mouth, or by deeds, for instance by bowing, saluting, and so forth,

---

17 *ST* II-II 129.7 ad 2.

18 *ST* II-II 103.1.

19 Aquinas claims that it is possible, before God, “who is the searcher of hearts,” for the witness of one’s own conscience to suffice for recognizing excellence. Since we cannot see into each other’s hearts, however, we require various means of “external” recognition. *ST* II-II 103.1.
or by external things, as by offering gifts, erecting statues and the like.”  

Insofar as honors are the best and only means we have for recognizing excellence and signifying our esteem for it, they are necessarily tied to the virtue of magnanimity. Aquinas claims that magnanimity is essentially about “great honors” because the greatest manifestations of excellence, which are worthy of the greatest honors, are the most difficult to attain and the most difficult to make use of in a way that reflects reason’s guidance. Aquinas claims that “the act of magnanimity is not becoming to every virtuous man, but only to great men.”

Aquinas suggests that magnanimity is exemplified paradigmatically by people who have achieved a high degree of moral excellence, who are greatly honored by others for their excellence, and who have the social, political, and economic power to perform acts of virtue on a grand scale. Magnanimity, as he describes it, is active in the life of the truly excellent among us. It is present in those who have so actualized their capacity for virtue that they concern themselves only with the greatest acts of virtue in order that they might reach greater levels of perfection. These are people who likely are in great health and have ample time and resources to allow them to focus on so perfecting themselves – they are the elite.

---

20 ST II-II 103.1. It seems important at this point to draw attention to the fact that some of the “external signs” by which we honor a person’s excellence can be in reference to a basic kind of excellence that is associated with human dignity and is a property of human beings as such. Honoring a person need not be about “erecting statues” and “bowing.”

21 ST II-II 129.2.

22 ST II-II 129.3 ad 2.

23 Importantly, for Aquinas and Aristotle, upon whom Aquinas draws extensively in defining magnanimity, these magnanimous “people” will all be men. Both Aquinas and Aristotle hold that women are, by nature, inferior to men and incapable of achieving excellence in virtue to this degree. See: ST I 92.1 ad 2.
Here it seems that Aquinas is taking us in a different direction than we were headed previously in our discussion of magnanimity, understood as a virtue of encouragement and firmness of mind. Instead of a general virtue important for the sustained pursuit of excellence we have a virtue that is really only for a rare few who have achieved superior degrees of excellence relative to the rest of society, and whose excellence is deemed to be of greater value to society. Aquinas draws a direct connection between social recognition of a person’s excellence and the actual superiority of the excellence exhibited. Those who are greatly honored just are the paragons of human excellence. This is different from the way that people today might think about what it means to aim for and achieve excellence.

In light of the fact that contemporary ethical reflection must take into consideration the complicated dynamics of oppression and the interests of power, it is necessary to recognize that it is no longer advisable simply to equate social recognition of excellence with objectively valuable qualities. Diana Cates helps us to clarify this point. While employing Thomistic thought to help us to understand the experience of anger expressed in the writings of contemporary author Audre Lorde, Cates writes,

Thomas does not make a distinction between the excellence that a person possesses (objectively and in the eyes of those who matter most to her) and the excellence that she believes she possesses (objectively, but contrary to a particular person’s recognition or some broader communal recognition). This is probably due to the fact that the ‘self’ of his time, unlike our own, was so strongly communal. Some such distinction will have to be made, however, if we are to appropriate Thomas’s analysis for our time. Many women, for example, recognize certain qualities that they possess as being excellences (and, hence, foundations for proper self-love) even though many of the powerful males in our society refuse to recognize them as such. Thomas offers no clear way of talking about the self-loving anger of people whose assessments of their own excellence differ from the prevailing cultural assessments.

---

In light of our contemporary awareness of the dynamics of oppression we are right to think differently about the direct connection between honor and excellence that Aquinas appears to assume. It is good to keep in mind that significant examples of human excellence are not always socially recognized,\(^\text{25}\) that socially recognized excellences are not always reflective of genuine excellence, and that some forms of excellence are means of maintaining dominant value systems relative to alternative systems of value.

Aquinas may not have had the same concern about how honor functions in society, but he does at several points distance himself from too narrow an understanding of the relationship between magnanimity and worldly honors. For Aquinas, the highest worldly honors and the greatest acts of virtue associated with this level of greatness are possible only for an elite few. However, as a Christian thinker, he holds that, through grace and the generous support of God, human beings, regardless of material circumstances, are capable of a great deal more than their material circumstances seem to allow.\(^\text{26}\) According to Aquinas’s Christian understanding of the world and of human destiny there are reasons to believe that all human beings are worthy, because of God’s love and graciousness, of the highest form of greatness found in perfect happiness, which is experienced in union with the divine.\(^\text{27}\) Ultimately, it is happiness that is the desired goal in the pursuit of excellence. Aquinas writes, “honor is not the reward of virtue, as regards the virtuous man, in the sense that he should seek for it as his reward: since the

\(^{25}\) For example, excellent care-giving professionals, and the virtues they develop in the context of care-giving, are socially rarely recognized in a society that values virtues of independence.

\(^{26}\) See Aquinas on Grace: ST I-II 109-114.

\(^{27}\) Importantly, this is a judgment about one’s fundamental worth and value and need not be tied to social recognition of such greatness. It is sufficient that God recognizes and affirms such value.
reward he seeks is happiness,\textsuperscript{28} which is the end of virtue."\textsuperscript{29} Michael Keating describes the import of this dimension of Aquinas’s understanding of magnanimity this way:

For Thomas … magnanimity is not the aspiration toward greatness of whatever kind in whatever way; it is not an unbound grasping after anything and everything high or noble or worthy of honor. It is rather the virtue by which we lay hold of that greatness that is, in the nature of things, appropriate to us. So the crucial question arises: what measure of greatness, in the nature of things, is appropriate to the human? … In the light of the revelation of Christ, Thomas has gained an immeasurably deeper understanding of the proper end of human life. … In Thomas’s expanded universe, under the call of the Christian to divine sonship … the possibilities for magnanimity multiply incalculably.\textsuperscript{30}

The greatness that is appropriate to human beings, according to the Christian tradition, consists in their being called to eternal friendship with the divine. Magnanimity, under the influence of grace, becomes the virtue by which one understands such a calling and also desires it. There is a certain paradox here, however, which highlights the intimate relationship between humility and magnanimity in the Christian tradition – one who desires union with God must first understand who she is as utterly dependent upon and as nothing without the divine before she can then come to appreciate the higher degree of excellence that is appropriate to her. In Aquinas’s Christian context, magnanimity has to be more than a virtue simply for the worldly elite who are concerned with worldly honors.

At several points in his discussion, Aquinas indicates that magnanimity’s true concern is excellence, rather than honors. In commenting on what makes magnanimity a “special” virtue he writes, “now magnanimity establishes the mode of reason in a determinate manner, namely honors…: and honor, considered in itself, is a special good,

\textsuperscript{28} i.e., perfection of his/her being

\textsuperscript{29} ST II-II 131.1 ad 2.

and accordingly magnanimity considered in itself is a special virtue. Since, however honor is the reward of every virtue, … it follows that by reason of its matter it regards all the virtues.”31 Because virtue, by definition, manifests a perfection of our powers, virtue is the best and most worthy kind of excellence for human beings. With regard to magnanimity, Aquinas strives to make the point that what magnanimity is really about is the excellence of virtue, which is or can be attested to by honors.32

Aquinas clearly recognizes a hierarchy of excellences. Those excellences that perfect an individual’s capacity to live in accordance with the divine will (theological and infused virtues) are, objectively, superior and thus worthy of the greatest honor. The greatest honor comes from doing God’s will in the sight of God. Following these virtues in rank would be the moral virtues that perfect a person’s capacity to live in the light of reason. The greatest of these virtues, according to Aquinas, would be those that are the most rare and difficult to acquire, and these would be deserving of the greatest honors. Overall, however, the concern is excellence. Aquinas clarifies this point in claiming, “since the magnanimous tends to great things, it follows that he tends chiefly to things that involve a certain excellence, and shuns those that imply defect. Now it savors of excellence that a man is beneficent, generous and grateful. Wherefore he shows himself to ready to perform actions of this kind, but not as acts of the other virtues.”33

What distinguishes the magnanimous person from a person who exhibits virtue, but without magnanimity, is that the former is virtuous (beneficent, generous, grateful, 

31 ST II-II 129.4.

32 It is clear here that Aquinas believes honor to be the due reward of virtue and he seems to believe that virtues, as manifestations of excellence, will be honored and socially recognized. As is explored above, however, it ought to be recognized that not all manifestations of virtue will be socially recognized by honor. In addition to this, theological and infused virtues might not be socially recognized and honored as excellences, although God could be an adequate witness to the excellence manifested in these virtues.

33 ST II-II 129.4 ad 2.
etc.) because he understands that by being so, he is pursuing and manifesting the excellence that is appropriate to his nature as a human being and child of God. What turns an expression of generosity into an expression of magnanimity is the intent to pursue excellence for its own sake. One is not simply disposed to be generous: one is disposed to be generous because one wishes to exhibit greater excellence by being generous. One understands that one's generosity is tied to becoming a more excellent person as such. Magnanimity is the virtue by which one takes other virtues to new heights. Aquinas writes, “every virtue derives from is species a certain luster or adornment which is proper to each virtue: but further adornment results from the very greatness of a virtuous deed, through magnanimity which makes all virtues greater….”

What distinguishes the magnanimous person is the conscious concern for excellence.

It stands to reason that, for Aquinas, the most magnanimous among us will be those who are also the most excellent. It would be unfortunate, however, to think of magnanimity as something of which only the socially recognized most excellent among us are capable. Rather than being simply about “great honors,” magnanimity is about “greatness” as such – it is about the recognition of a degree of greatness already possessed by a human being, by virtue of his humanity, and the recognition and pursuit of greater degrees of excellence that he hopes to attain. It is also about how one relates to the recognition of such greatness on the part of oneself or others. Magnanimity comes into play when what we have in mind is excellence, and we can recognize now that excellence may come in a variety of forms depending on one’s particular potential and context.

---

34 ST II-II 129.4 ad 3.

35 This concern for excellence includes a concern to perfect our powers in such a way that one also perfects one's ability to care for and benefit others for their own sake.
The connection to honor that Aquinas highlights is valuable in that it brings to mind the point that part of what it means to strive for excellence is to strive also for recognition of one’s excellence.\textsuperscript{36} What Aquinas emphasizes with regard to this hope for recognition is that it, too, ought to be governed by virtue. Magnanimity, Aquinas argues, not only assists and encourages the pursuit of excellence; it is also tasked with ensuring that we develop the right attitude toward our own excellence and toward the recognition of our excellence that we receive from others.

Aquinas’s understanding of what it means to develop a right relationship to one’s own excellence highlights another dimension of the intimate bond between magnanimity and humility. In his discussion of magnanimity, as the virtue that concerns honor, Aquinas claims that magnanimity is about being properly drawn to honors and about keeping one’s mind on the excellence that honors are meant to signify. If one is to pursue and attain genuine excellence one must do so excellently. This means: 1) that the magnanimous person is one who is aware of the degree to which she deserves to be honored by others. In other words, the magnanimous person recognizes honors as being justly deserved; and 2) that magnanimity is the virtue by which one makes good use of honor by pursuing excellence and employing honor in the service of glorifying God and benefiting the community. With these things in mind, it becomes clear that magnanimity cannot function fully without humility.\textsuperscript{37} Aquinas explains, “…magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God: thus if his soul is endowed with great virtue, magnanimity makes him tend to perfect works of virtue; and the same is to be said of the use of any other good, such as science

\textsuperscript{36} It seems that recognition can come not only from other human beings but also from the self; it can also come from God, in the Christian context.

\textsuperscript{37} Establishing this connection between humility and magnanimity is a striking accomplishment for Aquinas because it appears that there is little to no room for humility in the Aristotelian account of magnanimity.
or external fortune.”38 Through magnanimity we locate the best in ourselves, and in a spirit of self-love we latch on to those strengths and nourish them in order that we may experience greater levels of the good that is in us, and we hold fast to this pursuit even in the face of difficulty. We take what is good and we strive to make it great.

The fact that Aquinas understands our strengths to be gifts received from God does not diminish the honor that they are due. Moreover, recognizing that one is the recipient of such gifts does not detract from the ability to claim them as one’s own. What Aquinas’s discussion of magnanimity importantly highlights is this: in large part, our gifts, i.e., our strengths, come from beyond ourselves. Insofar as we are the ones who make the choices regarding what we do with those strengths, however, we are right to consider them as our own. When we make use of those strengths to attain genuine excellence, we rightly feel that any recognition and approbation we receive is well deserved. But if we fail, simultaneously, to show due gratitude toward those who have supported us, we expose the disordered nature of our desires for our own excellence. We expose our lack of humility. Our claim to genuine excellence is thereby lost. An appropriate relationship to honors received will be one in which a person honors those who have made her being-honored possible. Aquinas implies that this happens not only by expressions of gratitude but also, and most admirably, by making sure that the excellence attained and the honors received both honor God and serve the common good.39

38 ST II-II 129.3 ad 4. It is worth noting here that perfect works of virtue, for the Christian will be manifest in those that successfully bring one closer to uniting with God and with others through God.

39 Keys writes, “…Aquinas evidently judges that the magnanimous need regular reminders of their own humanity, of their natural being-part of various societies, and of the extent to which they inevitably depend upon persons and the excellences of others.” Mary Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 155.
Magnanimity, then, is the virtue by which we come to a just awareness of our excellence or potential for excellence, which enables us to be drawn appropriately toward various forms of honor by which our excellence is recognized by others. Aquinas argues that magnanimity is important also for helping one to make good use of honors received. How one makes use of honor is directly related to the way in which one is drawn toward honor: if one desires honor only because one craves recognition and social adoration, or one hopes to re-affirm one’s sense of superiority or acquire greater social privilege, then one will use honors to establish those ends. To be honored is to be elevated in the eyes of those who wish to make known one’s excellence; in order to be appropriately drawn toward honor, Aquinas claims that it is important not to pursue honor for honor’s sake, but to pursue honor in an effort to glorify God and to benefit others. In his discussion of glory, which is a means of showing honor by praise, Aquinas writes,

> It is requisite for man’s perfection that he should know himself; but not that he should be known by others, wherefore it is not to be desired in itself. It may, however, be desired as being useful for something, either in order that God may be glorified by men, or that men may become better by reason of the good they know to be in another man, or in order that man, knowing by the testimony of others’ praise the good which is in him, may himself strive to persevere therein and to become better.\(^{40}\)

As Mary Keys argues, an appropriate desire for excellence, in Aquinas’s view, is one that reflects an understanding of the self as a self whose excellence is tied to the relative excellence of others and of the society in which one lives. She writes that Aquinas stresses “…that the magnanimous man focuses on a self-transcendent goal or goals to which he refers his striving for personal excellence. Aquinas judges that the full self-fulfillment of human beings comes only in the context of loving and working for common goods, goods that can be shared by many and that benefit many.”\(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\) ST II-II 132.1 ad 3.

\(^{41}\) Keys, *Common Good*, 149.
well to the object of one’s excellence is to understand that honors are good only insofar as they are put to good use. The judgment regarding the degree to which they are, in fact, being put to good use depends on the degree to which they actually contribute to the good of others and to the glory of God.

A magnanimous person knows her particular strengths. The virtue of magnanimity requires the kind of self-reflection and awareness that is based on a firm sense that one’s strengths are indeed strengths, and they are indeed valuable. Because they are so valuable, they deserve to be developed further, in order that a person may come to experience in greater and greater ways the kinds of excellence that are distinctively her own. As Aquinas describes it, magnanimity is a virtue of encouragement. It gives one the confidence to continue pursuing the great things that are possible for one. Through magnanimity one exhibits a healthy and self-loving appreciation of one’s gifts and potential for growth, and one pursues recognition of those gifts with an eye not only to self-betterment but also to the attainment of greater goods for others. According to Keys’s Thomistic understanding:

Magnanimity rouses the soul to attempt great works, to struggle to bring about great goods in the face of internal or external difficulties (cf. II-II 129.5, with 131.2 ad 1). This proper sense of one’s own capacity for virtue, together with a noble longing and daring to attempt to bring about greater goods for oneself, one’s neighbors, and one’s community, and for the glory of God (see also II-II 131.1 and 132.1) is excellence that elicits impressive acts of other virtues, brings them to new heights, and adds to their luster.

---

42 Cates writes that Aquinas implies that our varying forms of excellence are what make us “distinctively who we are” and “objectively lovable.” Magnanimity, as the virtue responsible for encouraging us to identify, pursue, and seek recognition for excellence can then be understood also as a virtue by which one stands firm in developing and valuing one’s own distinctiveness. Cates, “Anger,” 55.

43 Keys, Common Good, 153.
By conceiving of magnanimity and excellence in broader terms, we can free magnanimity from being characterized as the virtue that enables an elite few to concern themselves with pursuing only the highest forms of excellence, which are socially recognized by the greatest honors. Instead, our attention can be drawn toward the “excellence” that lies within every individual, by virtue of his dignity and destiny, and by virtue of his potential for the cultivation of virtue, in accordance with reason and also in accordance with faith. Humility forms our desires for excellence in light of a recognition of our dependence on others, and, most importantly for Aquinas, on God. Humility keeps our hope for excellence on the right track by ensuring that we do not aspire to more than is possible for us. Magnanimity, in turn, keeps us from falling off track. Humility calls to mind our limits and boundaries; it enables us to keep our desires for excellence in line with an understanding of ourselves as dependent and deeply relational. Through humility we are able to see more clearly that our excellence is tied to the excellences of others. To pursue excellence well is to do so in a way that reflects our real limitations. Aquinas’s perspective shows that coming to such an awareness can, in fact, have the consequence of expanding one’s understanding of the kinds of excellence that are possible for one. To pursue excellence in the right way, in a way that reflects an awareness of limits, requires great effort and courage. Humility joined with magnanimity brings one into a productive relationship with one’s own excellence. Aquinas claims that these two virtues are inextricably linked, they are each a part of a two-fold virtue that is necessary if we are to get to our desired end.
CHAPTER FIVE: HUMILITY AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

So far we have examined primarily how humility functions on a personal level. We have seen the way that it moderates a person’s desires and the way that humility works together with magnanimity in a person’s pursuit of his or her own excellence. We saw early on in the first chapter that contemporary scholarship suggests that humility’s value is tied to both the way that it helps individuals to have the right kind of orientation toward their own pursuits and to the way it contributes to better ways of relating to others. The connection between these two aspects of humility is not always clear. Proponents and critics alike both share the belief that humility involves a particular way of being in relation to others. Proponents claim that humility enables one to avoid mistreating others and to treat them with respect. Critics argue that humility leads either to anti-social behavior or to harmful dispositions of subservience and submission. If humility is to be seen as virtuous, it is important that it not lead to a way of relating to others that ends up ultimately harming rather than benefiting the individual who cultivates it. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the way that humility influences our relationships with others, it is helpful to examine the relationship between humility and the virtue whose primary function is the establishment and maintenance of right relationships – the virtue of justice.

Humility, Reverence, and Justice

If humility is essentially, as St. Thomas argues, about the way that we moderate our desires for various forms of “excellence,” so that our desires and the actions to which they give rise reflect an accurate self-understanding, then what does humility have to do with our relationships with others? Humility requires that we come to have an accurate understanding of self as a particular individual and as a human being, in order to cultivate desires for excellence that are appropriate to who we are at any given moment.
Humility is directly tied to others because any accurate understanding of the self will involve a simultaneous understanding of others. We develop our self-understandings in relation to diverse others: the “divine” other, other human beings, other animals, and other forms of living and non-living things. How we understand what it means to be who we are relative to others will have a tremendous influence on the way that we choose to live in relationship with them. For example, if one believes that one’s skin color or ethnic origin places one in a position of superiority relative to other human beings one will relate to others in a way that reflects that belief. Furthermore, how we view ourselves relative to others influences how we orient ourselves toward and pursue our various understandings of excellence. As we saw in Chapter 3, a person manifesting the vice of pride may assume that she is capable of achieving all that she hopes to achieve without the help of others. Such a person is more likely to fail to notice and show due gratitude for the assistance she has received and to think of herself as somehow superior to others because of her perceived self-reliance.

For Aquinas, a person who manifests the virtue of humility will know how and when it is appropriate to “subject” herself to various others. Aquinas claims that the underlying source of humility is reverence for God. He writes that humility “properly regards the reverence whereby man is subject to God.” This is because “the chief reason for suppressing presumptuous hope is based on divine reverence, which shows that man ought not to ascribe to himself more than is competent to him according to the position in

---

1 The Latin term *sublicere* suggests a placing of oneself “under” others. This can take different forms: Divine reverence inspires an awareness of being under/subject to God’s authority; certain spheres of life require subjection to others with more power, experience, or wisdom; one can also, out of a sense of the value of other human beings and their particular life experiences and goals, place one’s own desires under theirs on a scale of relative importance – in this case subjection does not require acknowledging a kind of authority, but involves placing their interest’s above one’s own.

2 *ST* II-II 161.3.
which God has placed him.” In reverence for the divine a person feels and understands herself to be part of something much larger and greater than herself. According to Aquinas’s understanding, a person who feels the appropriate level of reverence for the divine other will willingly subject herself to the divine order. She will understand herself to be limited in relation to the divine and to be a part of a larger, divinely inspired, picture. She will also understand that she is not the artist and that she is indebted to the artist for all that she is.

An attitude of reverence is essential for the proper cultivation and expression of humility, according to Aquinas. It contributes to the formation of a self-understanding that is proper for any human being: an understanding of oneself as finite creature but not infinite creator; as capable of knowledge and wisdom, but not omniscient; as powerful and self-directed but not omnipotent; and as subject, rather than ultimate authority. Reverence of this sort is necessary for the formation of an accurate understanding of human nature as limited, error-prone, finite, and not in complete and absolute control. According to Aquinas, we understand the nature of our limits at the most basic level by examining ourselves relative to the Unlimited.

This kind of self-understanding is the key to forming virtuous desires for excellence. In his exploration of the biblical account of humankind’s first sin, a manifestation of the vice of pride, Aquinas explains one way that human beings can go wrong in our desires for excellence: by failing to acknowledge the limitations that are proper to us as human beings. Aquinas argues that humankind’s progenitors displayed an inordinate desire for excellence because they coveted the kind of knowledge and wisdom

---

3 ST II-II 161.2 ad 3.

4 For further exploration of this kind of self-understanding and how it is developed and displayed see: ST II-II 80 – 84 (on the connection between acts of religion and reverence); ST II-II 101 (on piety); ST II-II 161-163 (on humility, pride, and pride as the first sin); and ST I-II 90-100 (on Law).
that is appropriate only to God. Human beings, according to Aquinas’s understanding, were created in the image of god, with the capacity to acquire wisdom through the operation of their intellects. The actualization of this power of understanding and knowledge constitutes a proper part of human excellence and happiness. Where Adam and Eve went wrong in their desires for this form of spiritual excellence was by hoping that “by [their] own natural power [they] might decide what was good and what was evil for [them] to do; or again that [they themselves] would foreknow what good and what evil would befall [them].”

They went even further awry by hoping to attain such wisdom and obtain perfect happiness in a way proper only to God, namely by making use only of their own natural powers, and by not relying on divine assistance.

In examining this biblical account, Aquinas aims to show that human beings are creatures with the potential to realize “divine-like” forms of spiritual excellence (knowledge, wisdom, freedom, etc.); however, without proper reverence we run the risk of mentally substituting “divine” for what is only “divine-like,” and thinking, feeling, and acting as though divine forms of spiritual excellence are proper for humanity. Reverence enables human beings to understand the nature of their “creatureliness,” and humility empowers them to keep this “creatureliness” in mind as they pursue their own forms of excellence.

Reverence entails deep respect and a sense of awe, it entails both a cognitive grasp of the superior value of the object relative to the self, and an emotional response in which one stands in awe of the object. Given who/what God is, relative to who/what human beings are, Aquinas argues that reverence is the proper attitude for human beings to have for God and it is out of reverence that human beings willingly subject themselves to the divine.

---

5 ST II-II 163.2.
The reasonable, proper response to the experience of reverence is to show respect in the form of honor. Aquinas writes, “… it belongs properly to religion to show honor to God, wherefore all those things through which reverence is shown to God, belong to religion.” (II-II 83.3) Here, religion is conceived as a character trait, rather than as an institution. Religion is annexed to justice because it shares with justice the quality of being chiefly concerned with rectifying relationships. According to Aquinas, “… the essential character of justice consists in rendering to another his due according to equality.”

Justice is “a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will.” Justice gives rise to a disposition to will and to act in ways that reflect a commitment to the common good, rather than simply to the good of the individual. Out of an interest to promote the common good, a just individual will behave in ways that reflect that interest. In the case of justice, this will principally be manifest in a desire to render to all individuals that which is due to them. Religion is annexed to the virtue of justice as a potential part. It falls short of the perfection of justice because there is no way to establish equality between the divine and human beings through any human action.

6 ST II-II 80.1.
7 ST II-II 58.1.
8 In discussing the theological virtue of charity in terms of friendship, Aquinas indicates that there can be a kind of equality between human beings and the divine that makes genuine friendship (character friendship, in the Aristotelian sense) possible. However, this equality is a result of God’s doing. Eberhard Schockenhoff describes it this way: “The Triune God establishes the foundation upon which the friendship of human beings for God can emerge by bending down to him in God’s becoming human, and becoming equal to human beings in the descent of love. Conversely, human life is given new dignity in the mystery of the Incarnation that renders it worthy of the love and friendship of God. Thomas gains the possibility of considering divine love for human beings as friendship not by any discounting of the equality between friends demanded by Aristotle, but in the measure that he conceives of God’s effective dealing with human beings in creation, Incarnation, and election. He interprets the concept of communication in light of his Christian understanding of God, which makes possible the equality required. God’s love draws human beings up into the community of his blessed life, and gives them that character and dignity that altogether and alone enable a friendship with him.” Eberhard Schockenhoff, “The
In describing religion as a potential part of justice, Aquinas states, for certain virtues there are which render another his due, but are unable to render the equal due. In the first place, whatever man renders to God is due, yet it cannot be equal, as though man render to God as much as he owes Him .... In this respect religion is annexed to justice since ... it consists in offering service and ceremonial rites or worship to some superior nature that men call divine.9

There seem to be two different movements here – in reverence for the divine one recognizes that the divine is so much greater, more valuable, and superior to oneself in light of one’s own limits; in this way, reverence is tied to humility.10 Insofar as reverence is tied to humility, willing subjection can be understood in terms of a recognition of the superiority of the divine relative to the self. In addition to this, however, reverence gives rise to the desire to offer what is due to the divine, and this is tied to the virtue of religion, which is the virtue by which a person, out of reverence for God, strives to honor God through diverse internal and external actions. Religion is the means by which human beings honor God, whom they revere.11 In this movement one subjects oneself to the divine out of a concern for justice, out of a desire to do and offer what is right to the divine.

The traits of reverence and religion are thus intimately linked. You could not be said to have the proper experience of one without an experience of the other. Cultivating and experiencing the willingness to show due honor to God is bolstered by the reverence


9 ST II-II 80.1.

10 This is perhaps why Aquinas links the reverence that is the basis of humility to the spiritual gift of filial fear, which is a kind of fear of the loss of one’s connection to the goodness of God (ST II-II 19.9 ad 4).

11 Because the virtue of religion is a habitual disposition to honor the divine it is best understood as a means of showing reverence. This is what makes religion a moral virtue rather than a theological virtue: “...God is related to religion not as matter or object, but as end: and consequently religion is not a theological virtue whose object is the last end, but a moral virtue which is properly about things referred to the end” (ST II-II 81.5).
one feels as something so small, finite, and fallible relative to God’s perfection, excellence, and enormity; and one’s response to this tremendous greatness is perfected by the will to do what is right toward it. In this way we can see a deep connection between humility and the virtue of religion, a virtue annexed to justice.

In his discussion of the relationship between humility and subjection to God, Aquinas claims that an individual’s willing subjection to the divine expressed in humility will also entail a willingness to subject the self to other human beings. We subject ourselves to others partly as a means of showing our reverence for God, as a means of honoring the divine. Aquinas claims that there is a sense in which humility requires subjection to all other human beings. In his response to the question “whether one ought, by humility, to subject oneself to all men,” he argues against the objections that humility is, in a significant way, about subjecting oneself to others – an act that he associates with the process of “esteeming” others as better than oneself.\textsuperscript{12} Aquinas argues that there are two important things to consider when it comes to understanding the value and relative “superiority” of different people. He distinguishes between the things that are God’s and those things that belong essentially to human beings themselves. He writes, “whatever pertains to defect is man’s: but whatever pertains to man’s welfare and perfection is God’s… Now humility … properly regards the reverence whereby man is subject to God. Wherefore every man, in respect of that which is his own, ought to subject himself to every neighbor, in respect of that which the latter has of God’s…”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{ST} II-II 161.3.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{ST} II-II 161.3. It is interesting to think about what it means to say that everything good is of God and everything bad is “of man.” Given that Aquinas has shown clearly, time and time again, that human beings are not simply vile, wretched creatures, it would be a mistake to interpret Aquinas as making such a suggestion here. It is more apt to say that human beings are created by God with the potential for truly astounding experiences of excellence, happiness, and spiritual perfection, and they are created by God with the potential to live in accordance with the divine order. Free-will complicates matters because human beings can also choose, out of ignorance, vice, or sin, to live in contradiction to the divine order. If one lived always in accordance with the divine will, that perfection could be properly understood to be of God
At a most basic level, whatever a human being has that is “of God” is life itself and the potential to attain genuine happiness. One way of thinking about what the distinction between these two different aspects of human being means is this: by virtue of the fact that you are a unique human being created by God, capable of various kinds of excellence, and created with the potential to live in friendship with God, you have value outside of your direct relationship with me. You have value that was bestowed by God and not by me or by any other human being. This value is more significant than any of my own individual aspirations and aims in life. Thus, there is a deep sense in which you, as a unique human being, are “better” or more significant than me (in reference to my particular life choices and aspirations). Humility allows me to recognize and accept that your value is not the result of my doing and it helps me to regulate my own pursuits of excellence in a way that keeps me from disregarding your incredible value as I pursue my own aims. In this sense then, humility does require one to subject oneself to all other persons.

because that is the natural outcome of God’s design for human beings. Our “defects” or various faults, then, are our own because they are the result of our having chosen wrongly or unwisely.

14 As I read him, Aquinas is very close to suggesting something like the attitude of respect for other moral agents articulated generations later by Kant. The calling of attention, the “Achtung” moment one experiences when confronted with another person seems analogous to the Thomistic recognition of something supremely valuable in others that ought to prevent one from making use of them as objects to suit one’s own ends.

15 This seems to be the dimension of humility that Statman (Ch.1) was most interested in highlighting. However, I am unconvinced that a truly humble and virtuous person would be as tempted to disregard the value of other human beings in the way that Statmans suggests.

16 At this point I am confident articulating, in a Thomistic vein, that this rule of humility holds for the divine person and for all other human persons. In light of recent philosophical reflection on the degree to which other species might be regarded as persons, in the morally significant sense, it seems that more could be said about the degree to which humility also requires limiting one’s own pursuits out of a respect for the value of other non-human and non-divine entities.
This sort of subjection is tied to a recognition of and willingness to offer to others what they are due as human beings. Determining whether and how one subjects oneself to another human being will depend not only on humility but also on justice, it will involve a careful consideration of what each particular person is actually due by virtue of being who he or she is. The degree to which, and the way in which, one values another as higher than oneself will influence how one determines what constitutes the right sort of conduct in relation to him or her. The virtue of justice instills in individuals a disposition to show due respect for other human beings and to act rightly in relation to them, particularly in their outward acts. Humility is important then, in relation to justice, because it instills in individuals a particular way of viewing the self relative to others that can help individuals to see more clearly what other human beings are really due. As we saw above, Aquinas suggests that humility supports the development and exercise of justice by instilling a deeply-rooted respect for other human beings qua human beings. This respect is rooted even more deeply in reverence for the divine. It is a form of respect that is distinct from the respect shown to others in acts of justice by which one aims to do what is “right” toward them in the interest of promoting the common good.

Our relationships with others are complex, however. We often have to consider a number of different things about individuals before we can determine what is due to them in consideration of who they are, not qua human beings but as particular, distinctive, persons. In his elaboration of humility’s relationship to subjection, Aquinas attempts to sort out these considerations. He argues that humility does not require a person always to evaluate him or herself as particularly more sinful or vicious or particularly less gifted than all other human beings. He states,

…humility does not require a man to subject what he has of God’s to that which may seem to be God’s in another. For those who have a share of God’s gifts know that they have them …. Wherefore, without prejudice to humility they may set the gifts they have received from God above those that others appear to have
received. … in like manner, humility does not require a man to subject that which he has of his own to that which his neighbor has of man’s: otherwise each one would have to esteem himself a greater sinner than anyone else.\(^\text{17}\)

At this point Aquinas has moved to a more context-specific way of evaluating one’s particular strengths and weaknesses relative to those of others. He is seeking to specify exactly what it means to say that humility requires one to esteem others as more valuable than oneself and, in so doing, to subject oneself to them.

As stressed in previous chapters, humility requires that one have an accurate self-understanding in relation to which one forms the right kinds of desires for the right kinds of excellence. What Aquinas drives home is that humility does not require one to ignore or downplay one’s strengths. Nor does an accurate understanding of the nature of one’s faults or weaknesses necessarily lead to the assumption that one is worse than others. It is appropriate to know that you have certain strengths and when to employ them and to know that others are more vicious or sinful than yourself and all of this can be done without straying beyond the virtue of humility. One can recognize one’s gifts without waxing proud and acting as though no one else has any gifts or that one is the only person with said gift. Likewise, one can judge accurately that others are guilty of far greater vices than oneself, while not adopting the proud posture of a person who does not admit his own limitations, mistakes, and vices while sitting in judgment of others. Because humility functions in this way, a humble person is better able to grasp her own and others’ particular strengths and weaknesses in order to know when is the time to learn from, obey, and listen to others, and when is the time to speak up, share, and develop one’s own gifts for the benefit of oneself or others. Humility does not require one simply to “bow down” to others. There are times when such subjection is fitting and necessary and there are times when it is not. It is particularly important, for instance, that a person not so subject himself to another that he ends up contributing to the sinful/vicious

\(^{17}\) \textit{ST} II-II 161.3.
behavior of another. A properly humble person will be aware when it is or is not appropriate to let go of his own interests and when to speak up for himself or others.

Aquinas argues that it is well within the bounds of humility for a person, perhaps out of a recognition of the limits of any one person’s knowledge of other people, to assume that others have hidden gifts or strengths of which he or she is not aware. On the basis of that assumption it is possible, out of humility, to esteem others as better than him or herself. Importantly, Aquinas claims that humility does not require one always to act on such an assumption, only that it does not go beyond humility to make such an assumption. This is why it is possible for a person who, by all accounts, is far superior to others in certain ways to “lower” herself out of a belief that others have something greater than she has.

Aquinas’s account of the way that humility influences one’s relationships with others, both human and divine, challenges rash and overly-simplified assumptions that humility has essentially to do with being submissive, uncritically obedient, and harmfully self-sacrificing. The humility that Aquinas defines is one that requires less blind submission and more careful evaluation of one’s strengths and weaknesses, and one’s possibilities and limitations, relative to other human beings and to the divine, so that one is in a better position to pursue genuine forms of excellence in the right kinds of ways. Such a pursuit of excellence will require having a robust understanding of what self and others are owed as human beings and as particular individuals, and the will to ensure that they receive what they are due.

---

18 Aquinas writes: “Nevertheless a man may esteem his neighbor to have some good which he lacks himself, or himself to have some evil which another has not: by reason of which, he may subject himself to him with humility” (II-II 161.3); and, “Wherefore a gloss on Philip. ii. 3, … says: We must not esteem by pretending to esteem; but we should in truth think it possible for another person to have something that is hidden to us and where he is better than we are, although our own good whereby we are apparently better than he, be not hidden” (ST II-II 161.3 ad 2).
If we return to the example of the prideful “ordinary priest” from chapter 3 with these insights regarding the relationship between humility and justice new issues come to light. The ordinary priest who behaves as though he is a bishop, without having the proper claim to that office, displays deficient humility in the form of pride by assuming that a certain standard of excellence applies to him when it, in fact, does not. Looking at this priest’s behavior through the lens of justice gives us a different view. A priest who behaves like a bishop is being dishonest. Aquinas claims that truth is a part of justice since it establishes a kind of equality with regard to the moral debt we owe in relation to other human beings.\(^{19}\) He writes, “…one man owes another a manifestation of the truth…\(^{20}\) This is in large part because “…it would be impossible for men to live together, unless they believed one another, as declaring the truth one to another. … The virtue of truth does, in a manner, regard something as being due.”\(^{21}\) In his inordinate desire for excellence, the priest fails to render what is due to others by presenting himself in a false light. Furthermore, it is clear that this priest is not motivated to promote the common good in his actions. His pride keeps him from behaving in ways that show a proper respect for the authority of his superiors. His actions indicate that he lacks respect for the hierarchy that is established, ideally, for the purpose of providing structure and contributing to the common good. To behave prematurely as though he is a bishop is to ignore and disregard the norms of the institution of which he is a part. It is a failure to show due regard for the good that such an institution does for the community and, in some cases, for the person endowed with superior wisdom, insight, or skill who rightfully holds the superior office. The priest’s behavior indicates that he lacks the habit of justice

---

\(^{19}\) *ST* II-II 109.3.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) *ST* II-II 109.3 ad 1.
whereby he would have established a perpetual desire to “render to each one his due” in accordance with what is right with regard to the common good.\textsuperscript{22}

This example is admittedly simplistic. It entails a number of assumptions regarding the degree to which such institutions actually promote the common good and the degree to which particular individuals actually deserve the superior positions they hold.\textsuperscript{23} Nevertheless, through this example it is possible to see that the relationship between humility and justice is an important one. In the priest as bishop example, pride prevents the priest from being able truly to cultivate and express the virtue of justice.\textsuperscript{24} Humility, therefore, becomes a valuable aide to justice because of the way that it helps one to form a more accurate understanding of where one fits relative to others. It also involves conceiving of the self as but a part of something much larger, which helps to facilitate the desire to behave in ways that show due regard for the whole of which one is a part. Justice, broadly conceived as a desire to render to others what is due, makes a valuable contribution to humility insofar as it keeps one’s will and behavior within the bounds of what is right with reference to a good that goes beyond the self. In choosing to pursue what is right relative to others one is encouraged to examine oneself in relation to them in order to determine what is due. This bolsters the kind of self-understanding that is necessary for the proper expression of humility.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{ST} II-II 58.1.

\textsuperscript{23} It is arguably a move toward the perfection of justice to be able to critique and reform institutions that seem, in fact, to detract from the common good. Some of this reform might take the form of shifting who holds superior positions of authority and changing the way in which people are granted those positions.

\textsuperscript{24} Pusillanimité as excessive humility can have a similar effect. It prevents one from forming appropriate desires to identify and develop one’s strengths in light of a truthful self-assessment. It therefore limits one’s ability to do right by others and promote the common good by capitalizing on those strengths in making contributions to society.
Humility and Blind Subjection: the Problem of St. Benedict’s 12 Steps

Although Aquinas makes clear at certain key points in his discussion of humility that humility, properly cultivated, does not lead to blind obedience and uncritical subjection to others, he appears at other moments to endorse certain attitudes and behaviors that seem to support a link between humility and problematic expressions of pusillanimity. In the last leg of his discussion of humility Aquinas considers whether or not the 12 steps of humility as detailed in St. Benedict’s rules for monasteries adequately capture the essence of humility as Aquinas describes it. Here are the 12 steps, according to St. Benedict and as laid out by Aquinas in the *Summa*:

The first is to be humble not only in heart, but also to show it in one’s very person, one’s eyes fixed on the ground; the second is to speak few and sensible words, and not to be loud of voice; the third is not to be easily moved, and disposed to laughter; the fourth is to maintain silence until one is asked; the fifth is to do nothing but to what one is exhorted by the common rule of the monastery; the sixth is to believe and acknowledge oneself viler than all; the seventh is to think oneself worthless and unprofitable for all purposes; the eighth is to confess one’s sin; the ninth is to embrace patience by obeying under difficult and contrary circumstances; the tenth is to subject oneself to a superior; the eleventh is not to delight in fulfilling one’s own desires; the twelfth is to fear God and to be always mindful of everything that God has commanded.\(^\text{25}\)

This characterization of humility appears to conflict with the definition of humility that Aquinas develops in his previous 5 articles. As one of the objections mentions, some of these steps “seem to involve a false opinion, - and this is inconsistent with any virtue, - namely to declare oneself more despicable than all men, and to confess and believe oneself to be in all ways worthless and unprofitable.”\(^\text{26}\) Opinions such as these, suggests the objection, may not reflect an accurate self-assessment. They appear to be unfair characterizations of the self relative to others. In addition, a cursory reading of this section of the question on humility seems to support the idea that being humble equals

\(^{25}\) *ST* II-II 161.6.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
being joyless, uncritically obedient, and self-loathing. In response, Aquinas claims that there is a way to read St. Benedict’s twelve degrees as supporting his overall picture of humility.

The twelve steps were developed as part of a larger picture of the appropriate behavior for a member of a religious order who has voluntarily agreed to submit to the norms of the institution of which he is a part. This means that there is room for Aquinas simply to say that, in this particular context, given the objectives of the order, it is appropriate to behave in such a way. Interestingly, however, he does not say this. Instead he argues that there is a good deal of similarity between St. Benedict’s depiction of humility and his own. As he develops his understanding of the meaning of these twelve steps, it is clear that his main concern is the danger of pride rather than of pusillanimity. In fact, he refers to these steps as the means by which a person, on his or her own and without the grace of God, “plucks out” the “inward root” of pride. Had he been as concerned with pusillanimity as with pride, he may have addressed this question differently. However, Aquinas does finesse these steps in such a way as to broaden their meaning. In doing so, he articulates an account of humility and submission that is likely to be more palatable to contemporary readers.

Working backward through the steps, Aquinas describes steps 12-9 as being about what it takes to subject oneself properly to God so as to live in obedience to God’s will

---

27 This is true of St. Benedict as well.

28 *ST* II-II 161.6 ad 1. Aquinas does not make an effort to explain why a person who has not experienced at least a sliver of God’s grace would be interested in “plucking out” the root of pride. He does claim elsewhere that even naturally acquired reason is capable of conceiving of some concept of a prime mover upon which all else depends for its very existence. Such reasoning may inspire the desire to distance oneself from thoughts and behaviors that imply that one is the center of the universe. It does not seem obvious however, that such behaviors as St. Benedict recommends would be the course dictated by reason. The awareness of indebtedness and interdependence that emerges out of the concept of relational selfhood seems to offer a more promising place to start for the development of such attitudes.
(step 12) as opposed to one’s own. This is another way of capturing what it means to base humility in reverence for the divine and out of that reverence to know that there is something more than oneself to which one is indebted and to acknowledge that the proper pursuit of excellence entails subjecting oneself appropriately to it. Through these steps a person does “not follow one’s own will” (step 11); one regulates one’s will in accordance with one’s “superior judgment” (step 10); and one continues in this effort to pursue excellence rightly, despite the difficulties involved (step 9). Aquinas views these steps as providing the proper foundation for humility. This means that one will recognize one’s place relative to the whole and will have an appropriate sense of one’s obligations in light of that expanded understanding. One will understand that one’s own desires are not the only desires that matter, and that it is best to regulate one’s desires in accordance with one’s “superior judgment.”

St. Benedict writes that humility requires one to “subject oneself to a superior.” Whereas St. Benedict is clearly referring to an individual person in the monastery who happens to hold a particular position of authority, Aquinas shifts the discussion by focusing instead on one’s own “superior judgment.” This creates an opening for the more complicated movements and decisions made in deciphering what kind of subjection is called for in light of diverse strengths and weaknesses we all have, and in light of the fact that different contexts call for different modes of expression. Finally Aquinas signals again the element of difficulty that is present in the pursuit of excellence and highlights the importance of holding fast to the goal in spite of the difficulty, which as we discussed in the previous chapter requires the virtue of magnanimity.

In his explication of steps 8-6, Aquinas reiterates his previous position regarding what it means for a person, out of humility, to be aware of her own faults. He aims to stress that these steps are about forming a proper self-estimation. He claims that a person arrives at proper self-estimation when he acknowledges and avows “his own shortcomings” (step 8), judges himself to be “incapable of great things” (step 7), and
subjects himself in the right way to others by putting them “before” himself (step 6). It is possible that Aquinas sees more continuity between the 12 steps and his own articulation of humility than is actually there. He does not elaborate here as he did previously on the importance not only of becoming aware of one’s faults but also of one’s strengths and gifts in forming a proper self-estimation. It seems more Thomistic to claim that proper self-estimation is key to humility, but such an estimation involves an awareness of faults as well as an awareness of strengths. Furthermore, it is reasonable, in light of his previous elaboration on humility, to assume that Aquinas suggests with step 7 that one who is humble will rightly judge oneself to be incapable of great things *all on one’s own*, which is an important qualification. He certainly wouldn’t mean to suggest that individuals, out of humility, ought to believe that they are incapable of great things even with the help of God’s grace. It is important to qualify this further by stressing that, because we do have particular strengths and gifts, we are capable of some great things even though we might not be capable of any and all great things. A proper self-estimation involves putting others “before” oneself in certain ways, as was described in the previous section of this chapter.

Lastly, Aquinas joins St. Benedict in claiming that humility will result in certain kinds of observable outward behaviors and acts, like not challenging the “ordinary way” (step 5), not speaking too much (step 2) or too quickly (step 4), avoiding “haughty looks” (step 1), and in “checking laughter and other signs of senseless mirth” (step 3). It is not clear how we should interpret Aquinas’s endorsement of these behaviors. Holding back and remaining silent so that one can listen to others seems a valuable step toward gaining a broader perspective that enables one to distance oneself from a self-centered point-of-view. Taking time to understand tradition and valuing the wisdom associated with tradition before one sets out to become a maverick seem like wise choices. And, as suggested above, showing due regard and respect for superiors by observing certain customary acts do seem like things a person would do in an effort to cultivate the virtue
of humility, especially if one is primarily concerned about the danger of pride. It is important to recognize, however, that such acts, in themselves, are not necessarily virtuous. If one submits to the “ordinary way” of doing things in cases where that way of doing things contributes to unproductive human suffering, then one fails morally. One violates justice as well as the principle of charity, if one inhabits a Christian worldview.

It is important to recognize the significance of context when one is attempting to determine the degree to which particular acts reflect particular virtues. What counts as a “prideful” or “haughty” look in one cultural context may be different than in another. In some instances, I fail to accord due respect by not looking a person in the eye, or by not enjoying her presence by laughing with her. Surely it is the attitude and the motivation behind the gesture, not the actual gesture that determines its relative “haughtiness” or “senselessness.” If we are to remain true to Aquinas’s virtue ethic it is important to recognize in regard to humility’s outward acts that any particular behavior can be a manifestation of different interior motivations. Thus, these particular acts are not always and necessarily linked to humility. Furthermore, other kinds of outward behaviors can be manifestations of humility. What determines if any given particular action is an outward expression of humility is the degree to which it was undertaken with appropriately humble intentions.

According to Aquinas, one cannot fully appreciate the virtue of humility without gaining an understanding of the way that humility is formed and expressed in relation to other virtues. Negotiating these relationships, as we have seen, requires not only humility but also the virtue of justice. Humility is expressed in particular actions, either inward or outward, in the context of living with and pursuing excellence in relation to others. The last three chapters of this dissertation have brought us into deep encounter with Aquinas’s reflections on humility; they have explored the connection between humility and other virtues important for living a good life. With such an understanding in mind, we are now poised to examine, in the conclusion, how this conception of humility encourages the
cultivation of qualities that allow one to excel in serving relational human beings and addresses the concerns about humility raised in the second chapter.
CONCLUSION

Humility is a virtue. It moderates our hope for excellences of various sorts. This hope is, in part, responsible for helping us to realize greater possibilities for ourselves. In the pursuit of excellence we lay hold of the value and potential within and strive to actualize it. In moderating our hope, humility works to keep our pursuit of excellence in line with an accurate understanding of one’s limits and possibilities. Reflection on relational identity indicates the need for a virtue that helps constitutively relational selves understand their limits – limits to self-understanding, self-sufficiency, freedom, and the realization of our differing distinctive capabilities.

Critics of humility claim that humility stifles the drive for excellence. Such stifling can be especially damaging to the oppressed, who already suffer from unjustly imposed limitations on opportunities for the realization of excellence. Hume claims that humility is a “monkish” and dour character trait that is neither agreeable nor useful for self or society. Spinoza claims that humility is essentially linked to a kind of self-hatred that makes one a cause of one’s own pain and that this pain limits possibilities for excellence as freedom. Nietzsche claims that humility is a disguised manifestation of self-interestedness that, ultimately, expresses a nihilistic orientation to life that prevents individuals from living full and creative lives. Mary Daly claims that, in a patriarchal society, it is impossible to endorse traditionally conceived virtues if one is to attain genuine liberation and that humility, as a “passive” virtue, serves patriarchal aims and contributes to the unjust suffering of women. Each of the major critics of humility bring to light important questions to consider; Mary Daly’s feminist critique is especially important for raising questions about gender oppression and encouraging the development of an account of humility that takes such oppression seriously.

Addressing all of these concerns requires thinking deeply about humility. It requires examining the way that humility operates relative to other virtues that are
important for the pursuit of excellence and for the establishment of proper relationships with others. Aquinas encourages an enriched understanding of humility such as this because of the way that he understands virtues to be deeply interrelated. Aquinas is an incredibly valuable resource. However, recovering his understanding of humility for contemporary use requires a critical lens – one that is particularly attentive to the problem of oppression and the way that dynamics of oppression influence one’s understanding of virtues and how they operate in people’s lives. From this perspective we have been able to gain a greater appreciation of the virtue of humility.

Exploring humility’s relationship to temperance clarifies that humility functions as a moderating virtue. This means that humility is not simply about restraint; it is about being disposed to hope for the right kinds of excellence (those that are actual possibilities) in the right kinds of ways (i.e., those that reflect an awareness of the influences of others). It is about experiencing hope in accordance with the mean, rather than experiencing deficient or excessive hope. Humility is thus not the dour, self-loathing, and nihilistic disposition that its critics describe. Insofar as humility is linked explicitly to an appropriate orientation toward excellence, it has much to offer those who cultivate it. It is both useful for their pursuits of excellence and is generally agreeable insofar as it enables them to choose paths that are appropriate to them.

Because humility moderates hope for excellence, it is also clear that properly expressed humility perfects a form of self-love in which one is drawn toward possibilities for greater self-realization. Humility does not require one to adopt the posture of a self-denying ascetic, and it does not express the kind of self-destructive hypocrisy with which Nietzsche was concerned. Humility is compatible with appropriate self-love. It keeps one from falling into vicious forms of self-love or self-hatred expressed in inordinate hope for

---

various forms of excellence. This means that, not only is humility an important check on pride and its diverse manifestations, but it also provides a boost to the pursuit of excellence by curbing the tendency to slide into expressions of pusillanimity.

Aquinas did not focus much of his attention on pusillanimity. Feminist thought signals that the problem of pusillanimity is more prevalent than Aquinas observed. It can be expressed in a number of ways, including in a person’s adoption of a kind of false-consciousness through which she values certain things as excellences worth pursuing even though they work against her own ability to live well. Taking pusillanimity seriously as a vice also challenges orientations toward life that express a “weakness of spirit” or lack of drive which limits a person’s ability to realize forms of excellence that are possible for her.

Proper moderation of hope for excellence requires more than simply humility, however. Aquinas claims that humility is part of a two-fold virtue relative to hope for excellence. This is because hope involves two different movements: one toward the object hoped for and one away from the obstacles that will make attaining the object a struggle. Humility helps one to select the proper course. Magnanimity helps one to stay on course. Magnanimity provides the strength of mind and heart necessary to endure the struggle and overcome obstacles. This requires becoming aware of one’s potential, tending to and honing one’s strengths, and nurturing one’s hope. Magnanimity strengthens hope by instilling confidence in the attainability of excellence. It wards off despair by calling to mind one’s inherent value, strengths, and potential for greater self-realization and the available means of support. Under the weight of oppression, magnanimity becomes even more important as a virtue that can help individuals to resist and challenge obstacles to the realization and recognition of excellence.

At first blush, it appears as though Aquinas links magnanimity specifically to the pursuit and expression of excellences that are socially recognized as worthy of the greatest honors. Feminist reflection makes clear that oppression can be manifest in a
failure to recognize various forms of excellence as experienced in the lives of those who are oppressed. We have reason, therefore to distance magnanimity from too close an association with widely-regarded and socially recognized honors. Aquinas’s description of magnanimity allows for a more nuanced understanding of magnanimity as a virtue concerned primarily with the greatness within and the potential to realize various forms of excellence. A key dimension of his understanding of magnanimity is his claim that magnanimity also involves pursuing excellence excellently. This means, for Aquinas, that one is oriented toward excellence in such a way that one is aware of the degree to which his excellence deserves recognition but is also aware of contributions others have made toward one’s realization of excellence. This awareness brings with it an awareness of one’s obligations toward others and a decision to make good use of recognition received by contributing to the common good. These dimensions of Aquinas’s thought on magnanimity and its relation to humility clarify why his account of these virtues are important for the well-being of constitutively relational selves.

Aquinas’s discussion of the relationship between humility and magnanimity brings attention to another issue – that which regards what it means to acknowledge limitations to, and obstacles that stand in the way of, certain forms of excellence. Spinoza claims that humility is essentially associated with being pained by limits. His reflections encourage us to reflect on the association between humility, magnanimity, the pursuit of excellence, and the experience of pain. It is unlikely that anyone will ever have a full awareness of all of her limits such that she is able to cease being pained by them in diverse ways. For example, even though she may be aware that much of what she believes to be true and valuable has been a result of a long process of a specific form of enculturation, a person may still be significantly pained by experiences with others that challenge her beliefs and, thereby, expose her limitations. A person may know that accidents happen and that disease may strike at any time, but still be significantly pained by the loss of possibilities that comes from a life-changing accident or debilitating illness.
Insofar as humility involves an intentional focus on one’s limits, both as a human being and as a particular individual, it can lessen the intensity of the blow one feels in encountering limits – because humility disposes individuals to expect limits to be there. A humble person will also likely recognize that the pain one experiences in encountering limits can initiate deeper reflection regarding the degree to which one truly understands one’s limits. It can be valuable for spurring the kind of reflection that is necessary for distinguishing between those limits that are necessary or unavoidable and those that might be unjustly imposed. Aquinas also makes clear in his discussion of magnanimity that the pursuit of excellence will involve painful struggle. The virtues of humility and magnanimity help us to manage the pains we experience, either in encounter with limits or in the pursuit of excellence: we are neither deterred prematurely by painful struggles from pursuing genuine goods nor are we prevented from being able to adjust our expectations in the face of real limits.

Humility operates in relation to the virtue of justice as well. Aquinas bases humility in reverence. He argues that the proper response to that which is revered is to show due recognition of its greatness by honoring it. Humility enables one to understand one’s position relative to the divine and to other human beings who each share in the divine goodness. Basing humility in reverence for God allows Aquinas to make careful distinctions between inward and outward acts of subjection to others based in humility and between the kinds of subjection that are due to others for various reasons. Humility’s expression is complex, and subjection can take various forms. Aquinas claims that individuals ought always, out of humility to subject that which belongs properly to them to that which is of God in another. According to his Christian perspective, this kind of subjection is required if one is properly to honor the divine. In a less theological vein, it is possible to think of humility as being based in something like reverence for life itself. Aquinas distinguishes between reverence itself and the move to show due honor to that which is revered. This means that, with respect to reverence for life itself, one must first
recognize the awe-inspiring “specialness” of that which transcends the individual (in this case, the principle of life itself) in order to then recognize and feel the weight of the obligation to behave in ways that show due regard for that which is “special” and present in different forms of life, including human beings. Basing humility in reverence and viewing it in relation to justice highlights the outer-limit that is placed on our behavior and pursuits of excellence. Humility results in subjection to others insofar as one is constrained in one’s actions and pursuits by the obligation to recognize and act in ways that show due regard for the inherent dignity of others.

Beyond this, however, whether and how to subject oneself to others requires careful consideration of the consequences of such subjection. Aquinas emphasizes that subjection to others ought not contribute to their sinful behaviors. Justice is the virtue responsible for regulating our relationships with others so that one wills to each what is due in an effort to promote the common good. Subjection to others ought not to violate the demands of justice in offering what is not due or in resulting in the establishment and maintenance of relationships that work against the common good. Justice may require one not to subject oneself outwardly to others because one does not wish to contribute to their vicious behaviors or negatively influence the society and community of which one is a part. Refusing to contribute to a person’s vicious behaviors or to vicious collective action can be motivated by respect for others and a genuine interest in promoting their own good. Such a refusal, motivated by a concern for the common good, is compatible with humility.

Aquinas links humility to subjection to others, but his nuanced reflection on this issue shows that he does not link humility to blind subjection. There are benefits to thinking about subjection in these Thomistic terms. Subjection as manifest in showing due regard for the inherent dignity of other human beings keeps our relationships with others just and respectful. An awareness of the deep limitations faced by any one individual can also give rise to a generous-minded orientation toward others through
which one assumes that they may have valuable hidden gifts that may serve to benefit themselves and their communities.

Pursuing the goal of liberation from oppression is a matter of justice. It involves securing what is due for those who have thus far failed to receive it from the society in which they live. Those who are interested in liberation have a vision for a better future for themselves and their communities. Such a future will expand opportunities for human well-being and happiness. Realizing that vision requires community building and collective action. Accomplishing these tasks requires an awareness of our interrelatedness, respectful engagement with others, openness to make the most of our varied experiences, confidence, courage, and commitment to the common good. Humility, expressed in relation to magnanimity and justice, makes a valuable contribution to these aims, and ought not to be disregarded.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Button, Mark. “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’? For and Against Humility.” *Political Theory* 33, no. 6 (Dec 2005): 840-68.


