

The Neglected Virtue

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In the contemporary recovery of virtue ethics some virtues have fared better than others. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*¹ has entries for *justice, wisdom, courage, self-control* and the good of *friendship* integral to the life of virtue as understood by Aristotle and Aquinas. Yet between *Hume's fork* and *Humour* there is no mention of humility. Why so? Aquinas wrote that "after the theological virtues, after the intellectual virtues which regard the reason itself, and after justice, especially legal justice, humility stands before all others."²

The reasons for this eclipse of humility are several. One is the absence of humility from the Classical Greek and Roman account of virtue or excellence. Not only is it missing from that account, but for many in the Ancient world to be humble or lowly was to suffer evil. *Humilitas* meant first a lowly and despicable origin. It was to be born a nobody. In the *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero's privileged interlocutor M, discussing that chestnut of ancient philosophy, whether happiness is a matter of virtue alone, or virtue in conjunction with good fortune, lists those evils, or apparent evils, which can afflict us and lie largely beyond our control, beyond the self-definition of character: "poverty, obscurity, insignificance, loneliness, loss of property, severe physical pain, ruined health, infirmity, blindness, fall of one's country, exile and, to crown all, slavery." The word 'insignificance' here translates the Latin *humilitas*.³ To some this humility was incompatible with virtue. If excellence is a matter of character, of *who* one is and not merely *what* one does, and if who one is in a patriarchal world is to be the son of this father, to claim these ancestors, to be a nobody is already to fail in excellence, to be base. Only with the emergence of the early Christian communities, amid those who worshipped the God placed at birth in the animals' stall or trough, would a new virtue of humility be fostered. In the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians (2.3), the Letter to the Ephesians (4.2) and 1 Peter (5.5–8) humility is the virtue which marked Christ at the incarnation and which we are to emulate, it is the virtue by which Christians are to maintain the peace of the church community.⁴ Humility, it would appear, is a specifically Christian virtue. It measures the distance between Aristotle and Aquinas. Its contemporary eclipse

measures the demise of Christian ethics in the world beyond the churches.

Yet this eclipse is also evident within the churches. The new *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society* moves from Humanism to *Hunger*.⁵ A cursory survey of the books on sale at Heffers in Cambridge reveals little on the topic that is not historical.⁶ Nor do I remember humility as a subject within the syllabus at Blackfriars, Oxford (although it may be true that all the teaching in the studium aimed at humility of mind, a respect for the truth as yet beyond grasp or possessed by others than oneself). So what lies behind this neglect even here? Since we have learnt to ask with Alasdair MacIntyre *whose* justice we are studying, that is, to think that virtues may be reworked, redefined in evolving moral traditions, we must ask how Christians in different eras have reworked and redefined the concept of humility.⁷ It may be that the neglect of humility owes something to the version we have inherited and the uses to which it has been put. There is certainly a suspicion of humility in some quarters as a 'feminine' virtue by which women have been kept in subservience to men or a servile virtue by which the church has preserved the status quo between rich and poor. This article looks at two different versions of humility, by Aquinas and by Ambrose, which each offer limited grounds to end our neglect. That by Aquinas is easily found in the pages of the *Summa* and therefore will be treated briefly; that by Ambrose must be assembled from various of his writings and requires greater elucidation.

Aquinas regards humility as what keeps us in general from going after things too great for us. It prevents us from too bold a hope. This requires self-knowledge, a sense of what is in our power to achieve, but is itself an element of self-control.⁸ No wonder, then, we may add, if in humility's absence, the corresponding vice of pride is said to come before a fall. This is not a superstitious distrust in fortune, nor a promise of divine wrath. It states the facts. Those who lack humility are doomed to attempt the impossible. They cut an impossible figure. No wonder if the proud, who blindly rush to meet their Waterloo, are farcical as well as tragic. It was said earlier that humility appeared to be a specifically Christian virtue; it marked the distance between Aristotle and Aquinas. We must now ask in what sense that is true. John Casey has written that the "magnanimous (or 'proud') man" of Aristotle's "ethical portraits...is directly opposed to Christian humility."⁹ But Aquinas explicitly asserts that the humility he outlines is not opposed to the virtue of magnanimity. Just as humility acts against presumption, so magnanimity acts against despair and prompts us to the challenge of great achievements.¹⁰ What Aquinas has outlined thus far is a virtue needed by all, not the sole preserve of Christians.

It might be objected that, while this general disposition is well and good, it is remote from what we regard as humility or speak of in everyday terms as the actions of the humble man or woman. For what has been said so far applies to the undertaking of projects, whereas we usually think of humility (and pride) as a matter of how we treat one another, something closer to our manners. Someone who is humble, we are inclined to say, does not hold himself aloof. It is a matter of social standing. A humble person does not stand over others. She (all too often) does not take pride of place. On the contrary: the humble take the lowest place. Those who guard the legends of the English Province remember a novice master, Eustace O’Gorman (d. 1953), who, with a glint in the eye, told the novices: “you must be as humble as a doormat and as pliable as porridge.”¹¹ Aquinas both recognises this feature of ordinary usage and develops his concept in such a way as to avoid complicity in injustice. Humility tempers our hope for social standing in accordance with our *true* merits and failings, in accordance with who we really are in the world, and so prompts us to take the lower place when, but *only when*, appropriated.¹² It does not make us doormats. Humility is an appropriate social deference.

The virtue then has a particular place in the life of faith. It makes for our proper subjection to God.¹³ For obviously our failings stand in contrast to His perfection and our merits are themselves His gifts. Rather than presume foolishly on our own powers we are to beg for divine grace. Humility is thus a basic virtue opening up the way to receiving further graces and excellences from God. It predisposes us to accept what God imparts. And this humility before God involves our deference, in as much as we are sinners, to others in as much as they are God’s good work. We are humbled by their virtues.¹⁴ We are to revere, and so respect, the good in them. This is not to say that we are always to think others better than ourselves (a not uncommon misconception of the Gospel). It would be a nonsense for each person to think themselves the worst of sinners. Nor should the ministers of the Gospel defer to the prophets of Baal or the high-priests of the Market. To that extent the humility adumbrated by Aquinas involves a moral theology and not just a moral philosophy.

What are the weaknesses in this version of humility? They seem to lie not in its theoretical formulation, nor in its restraint of the over-ambitious, but in how we envisage this humility in our mutual conduct. First, it depends on a prior sense of who we are in the world, of how we stand to one another, and that sense may be all too easily vitiated by ideology and myth, a false belief in national, or racial, or sexual superiority. Second, humility seems to imply a vanishing social hierarchy, implies that we stand above or beneath and not beside the

next person. But what rôle remains for reverential deference in a supposedly democratic market-place of providers and purchasers? If these two difficulties cannot be resolved, are we not better off without this virtue? And even if these difficulties were met, it is hard to say just what Aquinas' humility might look like in practice — just *how* we are to defer to one another.

St. Ambrose, unlike Aquinas, allows us to see a picture of humility in action as a social virtue in a given time and place. In his *De Officiis*, like Aquinas after him, Ambrose treated humility as an aspect of self-control or restraint. But as might be expected of this fourth century bishop and metropolitan in the Western capital of the Roman Empire, he preached a virtue addressing the needs of his day. The *De Officiis* is thought to originate in a series of sermons preached to the clergy of Milan and revised for publication in the period 389–390 together with a much earlier sermon that served as preface to the treatise.¹⁵ As the title suggests the work takes as model and in many places closely follows the *De Officiis* of Cicero. As that orator's work was addressed to his son Marcus, and beyond him to the Roman people, so the bishop's is addressed to his 'sons', the clergy of the diocese, and no doubt to a wider audience beyond. Yet in the reworking of the model and addition of the preface Ambrose has introduced the theme of humility.

The theme is broached at once in the style and substance of Ambrose's opening sentences. A series of negative clauses or phrases raise before the reader a pride and status that the writer abjures: Ambrose does not think that he appears arrogant; does not usurp his place; he does not claim the apostles' glory. His aim is to match "not the prophets' grace, nor the power of the evangelists, nor the pastors' watchfulness," but only to attain to a diligent study of the sacred scriptures (I.1–3). Against this background Ambrose all but apologises for teaching what he has still to learn, presenting himself as a fellow pupil, protesting that he cannot avoid the duty laid upon him by virtue of his episcopal office. His rhetoric thus displays the humility and self-restraint in public that he will advocate, while it also grounds his authority as a teacher in the Biblical example of King David, the "teacher of humility" in the psalms, who likewise showed in what he wrote the "humility and grace of restraint."

This is the virtue which is to characterise the relations between the clergy of the diocese. It is a matter of considering others to be better than oneself. As Ambrose says later in the body of the treatise: "If we wish to commend ourselves to God, let us possess charity, be of one mind, pursue humility, each judging the other his better. For this is humility, if someone claims nothing for himself and judges himself the lesser man. Let the bishop treat the clergy as his members and especially

the minor clerics who are really sons: let him assign to each office the man he sees suited for it.”¹⁶ Ambrose inherited a body of clerics divided by the Arian controversy. The see had been held formerly by the Arian bishop Auxentius; the Catholic bishop Dionysius had died in exile. Ambrose’s election as a layman had been contrary to the canons laid down at Nicea and Sardica. His own authority could be called into question. Restraint and humility were needed to prevent bitter infighting and recrimination, to foster reconciliation.

In the preface it soon becomes clear that these virtues are to take a specific form: silence in the face of injury or insult. Christians are tutored in this silence by the examples of Susanna, of David, and of Christ, each of whom was silent in the face of accusers and false-witnesses: “there is also an active silence, as Susanna’s was, who did more by keeping silent than she would have done by speaking out” (I.3.9). Susanna, whose silence Ambrose also commended elsewhere and likened to that of Joseph (*De Joseph* I.5.26), may seem a strange example: she shouted out at the time of the attempted rape and at her trial protested her innocence to God.¹⁷ The point for Ambrose is that Susanna did not revile those who wronged her. So, too, David is silent when humiliated and wrongly called a man of blood (I.6.21). In the Gospel “the Lord himself was silent in working men’s salvation” (I.3.9). Restraint is to prevent a natural anger leading to insult. Ambrose alludes to and interprets the words of Ecclesiasticus: “Let there be a door to your mouth, so that it may be shut when it should be, and let it be very well bolted, so that no one provokes your voice to anger and you repay insult with insult” (I.3.13). Such restraint in speech, Ambrose says, requires humility.

The value of such a virtue is that it breaks at the outset a cycle of revenge. Ambrose bids the reader or listener to imagine that an insult or insulting accusation has taken place. He takes them through the feelings of each part as the incident unfolds and the consequences of keeping silent or answering back (I.5:17–20). We should resist the urge to answer back, for the aggressor wants us to do as much, to fall to his level. We should not be ashamed of a silence that in fact puts the aggressor in his place and leaves him beaten and contemptible. But those who lack humility, who cannot bear to seem put down by any insult, will say to themselves that if they are being accused, why should they not make up more serious accusations. This role of humility in the renunciation of vengeance is confirmed by the bishop’s commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel. Ambrose discusses why Jesus ordered the apostles not to carry a staff: “What is a staff other than a symbol for the display of power and a means of avenging affliction? Therefore his disciples carry out in the duties dictated by humility the humble Lord’s command

— for ‘in humility was his judgment carried’ — I say the Lord’s command; for he sent them to sow faith, who were not to compel, but teach, not to wield the brute force of authority, but were to exalt the doctrine of humility.”¹⁸

The modern reader might object that such a version of humility, advancing as its paragon the silence of a young woman threatened with rape, was guilty of furthering injustice. If so, the readers’ worst suspicions would be realised and this version of humility deserving of neglect. But that verdict would be true only if this discourse and its model were used to restrain the conduct of women rather than men, of the poor rather than the rich, of the the weak and not the strong. And that is not how Ambrose suggests we are to apply his words. For he gives us practical examples of the incidents he has in view: “Even if a slave should utter abuse, the just man is silent; even if a feeble person affronts him, the just man is silent; and even if a poor man makes false accusations, the just man makes no reply. These are the weapons of the just; they conquer by yielding, just as men skilled at the javelin are accustomed to win by giving ground and while they flee to wound their pursuer with heavier blows” (*De Officiis* I, 5.20). Ambrose wishes this humility to hold in check not first the powerless, but the powerful. His virtue belongs in what Peter Brown has identified as a wider attempt in the Late Roman Empire to effect “philosophical restraint on the anger of the powerful.”¹⁹

Where power has been abused and violence broken out, humility has a further task in bringing the powerful to amend their ways and do penance. In the spring of 390 some seven thousand citizens were massacred in the amphitheatre at Thessalonika on the orders of the Emperor Theodosius in retaliation for the murder of an imperial commander, Butherich. Ambrose wrote to the Emperor, intimated his excommunication, and urged his public repentance. Theodosius is urged to display the humility in doing penance that King David showed before him: “when David saw the angel striking the people he said: ‘I have sinned, I the shepherd, have done evil and this flock, what has it done? Let your hand be upon me, and upon my father’s house.’ (2 Sam. 24.17) So the Lord repented and He bade the angel to spare the people, but David to offer sacrifice ... Thus by his humility he became more acceptable to God, for it is not strange that man sins, but it is reprehensible if he does not acknowledge that he has erred and humble himself before God.”²⁰ And what Ambrose taught within the letter was probably echoed by its likely appendix. For it seems that the bishop sent with the letter his *Apologia David*, a commentary on the *Miserere*, Psalm 51.²¹

Theodosius did public penance at the close of the year. Ambrose

gave him absolution at Christmas. Four years later in the January of 395 Theodosius was dead. In his funeral sermon the bishop praised the emperor's humility in doing penance and cited the same example of King David from the closing chapter of the 2 Samuel: "Good, therefore is the humility that frees those in jeopardy, and raises up those who lie prostrate. The man knew humility who said: 'Behold it is I; I have sinned and I, the shepherd, have done wrong, and what have these people, in this flock, done? Let your hand be on me'. This is well said by him who subjected his kingship to God, did penance and after confessing his sin pleaded for pardon."²² As David found pardon, so did Theodosius. And each follows, says Ambrose, the example of humility set by Christ. Ambrose returns to David as exemplar of penitential humility yet again in his commentary on Luke's Gospel.²³

There are many references to humility in Ambrose's writings and the aim is not to list and discuss them all. But one further model should be observed: the figure of "Joseph who, sprung from the noblest line of the patriarchs, and not disdaining base slavery, would make a display of it by his deference and ennoble it by his virtues. He knew how to take humiliation, enduring it from those who sold him and from the one who bought him, the man he called his master" (*De Officiis*, II, 17.87). Ambrose would have us admire Joseph as a loyal subordinate, who, despite the blandishments of Potiphar's wife, displays the virtue looked for in an adviser (II, 17.88). In this final image of humility Ambrose offers the powerful a way of retaining dignity in adversity. Joseph is the man who falls from fortune but not from grace.

In 379, as he was preparing for Lent, Ambrose wrote to a newly appointed bishop, Constantius, exhorting him to preach. He explained those virtues which in preaching the new bishop was to impress upon his flock. Ambrose writes: "It is also very important that you persuade them to know how to be humbled, to know the true character and nature of humility."²⁴ And he gives the example of Joseph, who "did not become disgusted with his lowly condition, unworthy [as he was to perform] the duties of a servant. Rather he showed himself diligent and faithful to his master's commands, knowing by great prudence that it makes no difference in what condition of life one is found trustworthy, but that the purpose of a good man is to be approved in any condition, and, in particular, that character dignifies the position more than position the character. In fact the lower the status, the more outstanding the virtue" (*Ibid*). Those last remarks show a determination to de-couple social and moral worth.

St. Ambrose did not offer an analysis of humility comparable to Aquinas. But it was a consistent theme of his preaching. The bishop took from the Old Testament characters who exemplified virtues

required by his congregation to survive the vicissitudes of the period. As he wrote at the beginning of the *De Joseph*: "The lives of the saints are for the rest of men a pattern of how to live; accordingly, we are interpreting more fully the order of events set out in the Scriptures. Thus, as we come to know Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the other just men by our reading, we may, as it were, follow in their shining footsteps along a kind of path of blamelessness, opened up to us by their virtue."²⁵

The age was marked on the one hand by a sharp social hierarchy that divided the body politic into *honestiores* and *humiliores*. The status of the elite, the *clarissimi*, the *egregii*, the *perfectissimi* or *eminentissimi*, was played out in ceremonial and title; the masses were liable to torture, flogging and summary execution. Ambrose as the scion of a senatorial family and governor of Aemilia-Liguria had been a *clarissimus*. On the other hand it was a time of intense social instability in which court eunuchs became feared (and despised) ministers, when peasant soldiers laid claim to the imperial purple, and when rival *Augusti* vied for power, who in defeat might bring many down with them. Ambrose's own father disappears from history with the death of Constantine II. Insecurity bred an almost casual violence. This political instability further threatened an already divided Church: emperors sought alliances with the old Roman and pagan elite; they adopted new religious policies and bishops found themselves distant exiles from their sees. In such a world Ambrose shaped a virtue of humility primarily for the nobility, leading them away from conflict and in search of peace. He himself fell into disfavour with Theodosius and in the years 389–390 was absent from the court and keeping silent.

If Ambrose offers a specific practice of humility shaped by the needs of his day, what value does his virtue have for us? There are reasons for thinking its utility is limited. First, Western Europeans do not live in the shadow of their overlords nor under the threat of exile, impoverishment or sudden execution. Yet we do live in a period of increasing social division, changing patterns of work, wealth and status. These changes have also generated violence. When politicians fail us they display scant humility and wonder why the people they are meant to represent hold them in little honour. They might learn from Ambrose. Much contemporary ethics is rightly concerned with the elaboration and pursuit of justice. How, though, do we safeguard virtue under conditions of injustice? Ambrose at least raises the question.

He only raises the question. For a second reason to doubt the continuing relevance of this version of humility is its dubious success. Did this virtue restrain those for whom it was intended? Some might argue that Theodosius did no more at Milan than go through the motions of reconciliation at Christmas 390. There are other versions of humility.

In particular, between Ambrose and Aquinas stand Augustine and Benedict. Augustine largely relocated the virtue of humility within the soul as its subjection to God. Benedict gave the social virtue of humility the narrow context of the cloister where restraint was further strengthened by paternal authority. So Hume would later call humility a “monkish” virtue. These developments suggest the failure of Ambrose’s over-ambitious project. It could just be that Ambrose lacked the humility to know humility’s limitations. But Aquinas offers an attractive account of the virtue that distinguishes it from false humility and absolves it of oppression; Ambrose allows us to see value of the humility in a wider search for peace. Taken together these are surely good grounds for rescuing humility from the neglect into which it has fallen.

- 1 Edited by Ted Honderich, OUP, 1995.
- 2 *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 161, 5. Quotations from the *Summa* are in the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920.
- 3 *Tusculan Disputations* 5,10,29. The translation is from the Loeb edition by J.E. King, p.455.
- 4 Vide, Klaus Wengst, *Humility: solidarity of the humiliated*, Fortress Press, 1988, esp. pp.45–52.
- 5 *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society*, edited by P.B. Clarke and A. Linzey, Routledge, 1996.
- 6 Vide, *Christian Ethics, A Historical Introduction*, by J.P. Wogaman, SPCK, 1994.
- 7 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Duckworth, 1988, esp. pp. 1–12.
- 8 S.T.2a2ae, 161.1–2.
- 9 John Casey, *Pagan Virtue, An Essay in Ethics*, Oxford, 1990, p.200.
- 10 S.T.2a2ae, 161.1.ad3.
- 11 The particular guardians of this legend being Edmund Hill O.P. and Gerard Meath O.P.
- 12 S.T. 2a2a, 161.1.ad.1.
- 13 S.T. 2a2ae,161.1. ad5.
- 14 S.T. 2a2ae, 162.3.
- 15 On the date, vide Gabriele Banterle, *I Doveri, Opere Omnia di Sant’ Ambrogio*, Vol. 13, Milan, 1977, pp. 16–17. On the relation of the preface to the rest of the treatise, vide Jean-Rémy Palanque. *Saint Ambroise et l’Empire Romain*, Paris 1933, p. 225, n.151.
- 16 De Officiis, II, 27, 134.
- 17 Dan. 13:24 & 42-43.
- 18 “Quid est virga nisi praeferendae potestatis insigne et ulciscendi instrumentum doloris? Ergo humilis domini — in humilitate enim iudicium eius sublatum est — humilis inquam domini praeceptum discipuli eius humilitatis officiis exsequuntur; eos enim misit ad seminandem fidem, qui non cogent, sed docerent nec vim potestatis exsererent, sed doctrinam humilitatis adtollerent. Ev. Luc. VII, 59 Vol II, p.134.
- 19 P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, Wisconsin, 1992, p.147.
- 20 Ep. 51, in the translation by Sr. Mary Melchior Beyenka O.P., in *Saint Ambrose: Letters, The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. XXVI., Letter 3, p.23.
- 21 P. Brown, op. cit., p.111.

- 22 *De Obitu Theodosii*, 27–28, in *Le Orazioni Funebri, Opere Omnia di Sant' Ambrogio*, Vol. 18, Milan, 1985, p.230.
- 23 Ev. Luc. III, 37, in *Esposizione del Vangelo Secondo Luca (I), Opere Omnia di Sant' Ambrogio*, Vol. II, Milan 1978, p.278 .
- 24 Ep.2, in the translation by Sr. Mary Melchior Beyenka O.P., op. cit., Vol. XXVI., Letter 15, p.84.
- 25 *De Ioseph* 1,1, in the translation by Vincent R. Vasey S.M. *The Social Ideas in the Works of St. Ambrose: A study on De Nabuthe*, *Studia Ephemeridis 'Augustinianum'* 17, 198, p.91.

Hyacinth: Regarding Dominic

Bewildering as light off water is. But I could
say your name at least. I knew you intermittently,
once turned from the flame and caught you watching me.

Sometimes I registered a troubled face.
There were mysteries and storm clouds, tears,
a heart like the sea, hands that spoke different languages —

I am lost for words when I listen again.
At other times forget even to notice that you
are no longer there. How did I lose sight of that

loved body in the crowd? I was
busy with other business. One by one
we trickled from your hands like grain —

in twos and fours were driven back to life again:
woke with no hand touching the shoulder
to starlight or daylight. Good morning, whatever.

Like that horseman we saw crushed and raised in Rome.
You asked him, "How's life?"
"Sound, man." he said. "Sound."

With you the memory of everything's a river
at whose eroded bank
each word we speak is dipped and comes up clean.

James McGonigal