

Michael W. Austin. *Humility and Human Flourishing: A Study in Analytic Moral Theology*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 246 pp. \$85.00 (hbk).

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Michael Austin develops and defends what he calls a Christological account of humility. Since Jesus is the human ideal according to Austin, his account of Christological humility doubles as an account of ideal humility. The account is Christological in that it proposes, based on biblical evidence, a description of the humility of Jesus. Christological humility, according to Austin, consists in “*proper self-assessment and a self-lowering other-centeredness*” (40). Austin’s claim that humility has an essentially other-regarding dimension and that humility is therefore a social virtue is the ambitious part of his thesis, since most commentators on humility have located its core in self-regarding dispositions.

Austin finds evidence for understanding humility as a social virtue in canonical accounts of Jesus’ life, in Philippians 2, and in 1 Peter 5. From the gospels, we learn that Jesus consistently engaged people who were considered outcasts or outsiders in Ancient Near Eastern Culture; Austin names those with chronic illnesses, Samaritans, divorced people, beggars, and children. Austin claims that “it is fair to conclude that associating with and seeking to help outsiders and outcasts are indicative of the humility of Jesus” (27), but we are given no explanation for why these practices should be interpreted as expressions of Jesus’ humility rather than some other virtue, for example justice or love. Austin makes a stronger case for the social dimension of Christological humility based on Philippians 2:3–4, where Paul enjoins the faithful to take on the character of Jesus. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Austin says that “the content of these verses and their context point to something vital for our understanding of Christian humility, namely, that it is in part a *social* virtue. The content of these verses supports the claim that humility has to do with how we view others in relation to ourselves, and it emphasizes how one should prioritize and act upon others’ interests in relation to his own.” (32–33). Austin gleans a similar insight from 1 Peter 5:5, where disciples are told to clothe themselves with “humility toward one another.”

Placing others’ interests ahead of our own is not all there is to Christian humility, according to Austin. He claims that the Bible, including the *locus classicus* Philippians 2 passage, also presents a self-regarding aspect of humility that “has to do with proper self-estimation, including our knowledge of our status as creatures, our moral limitations, and our dependence upon God for our salvation” (38). Bringing together the self- and other-regarding facets of humility, we get Austin’s definition of humility

Journal of Analytic Theology, Vol. 8, August 2020

10.12978/jat.2020-8.100419032013

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as “proper self-assessment and a self-lowering other-centeredness.” This, however, is merely a “general and intuitive definition of Christian humility” (40). Austin says that the virtue of Christian humility can only be adequately displayed by listing its most important components, which Austin calls the “modules of Christian humility.” He proposes eleven modules of Christian humility, helpfully collected in an Appendix. Five cognitive modules:

- (C1) The humble person possesses self-knowledge with respect to his virtues, vices, and limitations, both personal and *qua* human person.¹
- (C2) The humble person knows that God deserves the credit for her salvation, talents, abilities, accomplishments, and virtues.
- (C3) The humble person believes that he ought to have a *prima facie* preference for the satisfaction of the interests of others over the satisfaction of his own interests.
- (C4) The humble person will not conceive of human beings in a hierarchical manner in light of their equal inherent dignity and worth as image-bearers of God.
- (C5) The humble person is properly concerned with how others perceive her.

Two emotive modules:

- (E1) The humble person has a *prima facie* preference for the satisfaction of the interest of others over his own.
- (E2) The humble person is motivated to act by her love for God and for the sake of his kingdom.

And four active modules:

- (A1) The humble person will be disposed to obey God.
- (A2) The humble person will be disposed to engage in self-sacrificial actions for the good of others.
- (A3) The humble person will not be disposed to seek either honor or social status.
- (A4) The humble person will be disposed to engage in particular forms of risk-taking.

The remainder of the book is taken up with three tasks. First, Austin defends his account of Christian humility against several objections, including theological objections regarding the humility of God and the appropriateness of *imitatio Christi*, and philosophical objections regarding the individuation of the virtues and Humean critiques of humility as detrimental to flourishing. Second, Austin examines the connections between his account of Christian humility and the cardinal and theological virtues. And third, Austin explores the relevance of his account of

¹ Austin has in mind that some of our limitations are features of the human condition (a lack of omniscience, for example), but others are person-specific (my especially bad memory, for example).

Christian humility to spiritual life, liberal pluralist social orders, family life, and sports.

Austin's efforts to connect his account of humility in specific ways with other virtues and with concrete domains of human life constitute his argument for humility as a virtue conducive to human flourishing. Virtue theorists presuppose that the virtues are so conducive, but the actual work of displaying how the virtues matter in daily life is often sidelined—especially by philosophers—in favor of conceptual analysis. Austin's book is a welcome exception to this pattern. I learned a great deal from his imaginative insertion of humility into the messy details of our lives. Austin is especially compelling in his account of the relationship between humility and sports. Philosophers, including virtue theorists, have paid little attention to sports relative to other domains of our lives, but Austin displays the difference the virtues make for how we play, watch, and evaluate sports in our culture.

My main concern about Austin's proposed definition of humility is its breadth. Indeed, some of the success he finds in describing the difference that humility makes to daily life depends on how much he has packed into the definition of humility to begin with. Austin worries that an over-emphasis on the individuation of the virtues will obscure their rich and salutary interconnectedness. My concern, on the other hand, is that an inadequate individuation of the virtues leaves us in the dark about which virtues are actually responsible for which excellences.

Prominent accounts of humility seek necessary and sufficient conditions for correctly attributing humility to someone. They focus on what is *essential* to a virtue as contrasted with the multitude of effects a virtue might have in different contexts. In considering some candidate disposition for inclusion in the account of a virtue, a virtue theorist typically asks whether one could imaginably lack such a disposition and still be said to possess the virtue in full. Take, for example, J.L.A. Garcia's example of a goalkeeper who non-culpably overestimates her abilities, but who is nevertheless free of any egoistic concern about her status as a goalkeeper. Garcia thinks such a goalkeeper should be characterized as perfectly humble, which shows that, *contra* Austin, accurate self-knowledge (C1) is not essential to humility, even ideal humility. I agree.

Austin responds that this way of defining a virtue, which is focused on necessary and sufficient conditions for accurate virtue-attribution, is liable to deliver "a truncated definition of the virtue" (53). This is because virtues are modular, which means that they are built up out of various dispositions that are "independent and domain-specific" (45). The total collection of these independent and domain-specific dispositions comprises a virtue in its perfected form, but we can aptly attribute the virtue to someone who displays *any* of its several independent and domain-specific dispositions. Since the goalkeeper is free of egoistic concern about her status (C5), she is humble; but since she lacks accurate self-knowledge (C1), she is not *perfectly* humble.

I understand the reasons for adopting it, but I cannot endorse this method of defining the virtues. Austin indicates that his method derives from Robert Adams's theory of the modularity of virtue,² but I fear the amendments Austin makes to the

² Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

modularity thesis undercut the explanatory power of his account of humility. For Adams, the modularity thesis is a response to the situationist critique of virtue ethics. Situationists appeal to empirical evidence that few people display consistent virtue-specific behavior across a wide range of diverse types of situation. Situationists argue that this implies there just *are* no moral virtues. At the other extreme, traditional virtue theorists argue the empirical evidence just shows that robust moral virtue is extremely *rare*. Adams's modularity thesis adopts a middle way: virtues consist of a motivational core and a series of discrete modules of behavioral dispositions that are domain specific. For example, if persons act as a humble person would in one domain, *and if that behavior is properly motivated*, then we should say they possess real humility, even if their failure to act consistently in other domains reveals that they do not possess humility in full. I highlight Adams' emphasis on a motivational core because I think it gets lost in Austin's presentation. For Adams, virtues are fundamentally about a core motivational profile, usually consisting of certain desires but sometimes including beliefs. Virtues are modular in the sense that full possession of the virtue requires the application and exercise of this motivational core across a wide array of types of situation, something that takes time, attention, and practice. Still, for Adams, there is a distinction between the core of a virtue and its various characteristic marks.

Austin amends Adams's modularity thesis in a crucial way. He writes, "We can conceive of modules of virtue not just in terms of the domains across which a behavioral disposition may exist [that was Adams's thesis], but also in terms of the relevant cognitive, emotional, and active aspects of a particular virtue" (46). In other words, Austin's presentation erodes the distinction between the motivational core of a virtue and its characteristic marks across situation-types. This leads Austin to offer his list of eleven modules of Christian humility, treating all of the dispositions on a par. None is more central to or definitive of humility than any other. Austin says that "we can properly attribute humility to one who only possesses a single module of humility," but all of the modules "are jointly necessary for humility in its *ideal* or *perfect* form" (47).

This has counterintuitive results. Suppose Derrick believes he ought to have a *prima facie* preference for the satisfaction of others' interests over his own (C3). On Austin's account, we can correctly attribute humility (albeit not *perfect* humility) to Derrick since he possesses at least one of the modules of humility. But don't we need to know more before we can conclude that Derrick is at all humble? Don't we need to know *why* Derrick believes this? Suppose Derrick believes this because he is self-loathing, or because he is afraid that he will be punished by God if he displays the slightest hint of self-interest. Surely if these are his reasons then Derrick is not humble, because he is lacking the proper motivational profile; he does not have the right kinds of interests and concerns for his behavior to be appropriately described as the behavior of a humble person. On my view, the core of humility, that which we seek when we pursue an account of humility, is a description of the motivational profile that lies behind the many different types of acts that would be accurately described as humble acts.

Austin refuses to individuate the virtues by picking out core motivational components that render them distinct from neighboring virtues. For Austin, the

virtues are so thoroughly interconnected and modular that any attempt to pry them apart or to isolate a core motivational profile will lead to truncated accounts of the virtues. “This view of the modules and the virtues might be unwelcome on an analytic approach prizing sharp classifications and a strict individuation of the virtues,” he writes, “but nevertheless if accuracy is sacrificed for the sake of such categorization, then clearly accuracy should be favored. This reply may be frustrating for an analytic philosopher or theologian, but it is arguably correct” (111).

I will admit to being frustrated. I wonder why we should think that accuracy is *gained* by lumping into an account of a virtue the many conceivable marks of that virtue. Wouldn't an accurate account of a virtue isolate and emphasize those dispositions essential to it?

Analytic philosophers seek such simplified accounts for at least two interrelated reasons. First, such accounts have more explanatory depth. I could name a super-virtue, call it Excellence, and include in its specification every conceivable good-making affective, behavioral, and cognitive disposition, but such a method would reveal little about the deep structure—if there is one—of moral character. Second, we are interested in that deep structure because we want to know what to aim at in moral formation. We want to isolate those deep features of a moral exemplar's character that empower her to behave so well so often. The promise of a virtue, at least as conceived by Aristotle, is that it provides a shortcut to being properly disposed in an endless variety of unforeseeable circumstances.

I think Austin has given us the core, more or less, of Christian humility, buried in his larger account. “The humble person is properly concerned with how others perceive her.” This is Austin's fifth cognitive module, although it seems to me to be more of an affective than a cognitive disposition. More needs to be said about the level of proper concern and the variety of ways in which one may be concerned about how one is perceived by others, but once these details are worked out, many of the dispositions that Austin associates with humility follow. And although I am not convinced that humility is *essentially* an other-regarding virtue, combined with love it has precisely those self-lowering, other-centered effects that Austin describes.