

Kent Dunnington. *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. x+192 pp. \$72.00 (hbk).

Paul A. Macdonald Jr.
United States Air Force Academy¹

In *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory*, Kent Dunnington aims to develop a particular conception of Christian humility, what he calls “radical Christian humility.” From the start, Dunnington makes it clear that “I am not interested in trying to defend an account of radical Christian humility against any alternative account. I am simply interested in getting radical Christian humility into clear view” (1). The account of radical Christian humility Dunnington wants to bring clearly into view is not, strictly speaking, his own. It is derived from a particular strand of Christian thinking about humility, whose chief exponents, Dunnington claims, are Saint Augustine (“the theologian of radical Christian humility,” (29)) and the early Christian monks. In the book, Dunnington juxtaposes this account both with what he calls “the standard account of Christian humility” and the various, other historical and contemporary philosophical accounts of humility that he claims have aimed to refashion humility and divest it of its Christian theological dimensions. In contrast, radical Christian humility is decisively informed and rendered intelligible by Christian theological commitments: “radical Christian humility makes sense as a virtue if Jesus’s Trinitarian life is the archetype of perfected selfhood and if cross-and-resurrection is the archetype of personal flourishing” (115).

Dunnington bases his account of Christian humility on the concept of “unselfing” (a phrase he borrows from Rowan Williams, describing how the earliest Christian monks viewed humility). The radically humble person does not merely have unusually *low concern* for his or her “self,” or “[his or her] own worth, skills, achievements, status, or entitlements because of [his or her] intense concern for other apparent goods” (16). Instead, the radically humble person has *no concern* for his or her “self.” More specifically, the aspect of the “self” that is of no concern for the radically humble person is what Dunnington identifies as the “ego ideal” (a phrase used within psychology): those reflexive beliefs and desires “that provide a sense of distinctive personal importance” especially over against others (79). “Attaining to this ideal,” Dunnington writes, “occasions an experience of my own distinctive importance over against others (pride), whereas failure to attain the ideal occasions an experience of loss of relative importance over against others (humiliation)” (79).

¹ The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not express the official position of the U.S. Air Force or the Department of the Defense.

Dunnington further claims that there are other “selfing projects,” such as pursuing a deeper sense of self-worth, or adequate self-understanding, or a more robust vocation, that are not necessarily bound up with or driven by the ego ideal—although, they can be and usually are. On the “no concern” model of humility that Dunnington elucidates, then, while the moral task of the one seeking to become virtuous is not to relinquish every sense of self, it “is to get over himself or herself entirely, to become utterly free of every concern for distinctive personal importance” (92), and so becoming rid of the ego ideal (and ego ideal-driven selfing projects) entirely.

There is more, though, to Dunnington’s “unselfing” view of humility. The reason that we can and should relinquish our ego ideals is because “we are utterly secure in God’s love and need to expend absolutely no energy ensuring ourselves of our distinctive personal importance” (88). The essential motivational component of radical Christian humility is trusting in God’s loving care of us. Accordingly, Dunnington defines the “unselfing” or “no concern” conception of humility as follows:

NO CONCERN: Humility is the disposition to have no concern to develop, clarify, attain, maintain, or safeguard an ego ideal, because of a trust that one’s well-being is entirely secured by the care of God (88).

So, to be clear, what makes this account of Christian humility “radical”? According to all major accounts of what Dunnington calls “mundane humility,” and related “low concern” accounts informed by the commitments driving mundane humility (which “focus primarily on humility’s role in protecting the equal dignity of persons,” (47)), “moral formation and the successful moral life require proper pride and the proper pursuit of honor” (66). “Proper pride” is grounded in one’s “sense of personal importance: confidence in [one’s] abilities, a secure sense of agency, aspiration, pride in [one’s] work, and a sense of dignity and self-respect” (63). In contrast, the early Christian monastics did not affirm anything resembling proper or virtuous pride. For these Christians, the true path of humility, and what is essential for salvation, instead requires relinquishing “the pursuit of a secure sense of self” (69). According to Augustine, too, completely submitting to God (which Augustine resisted doing for so long) requires relinquishing “a cherished self-ideal” (34) and in particular the prideful quest for “self-sufficiency and immortality” (39) fundamental to pagan virtue. The person who possesses and exercises radical Christian humility, Dunnington says, does not take pride in anything whatsoever, “since pride is about securing one’s own distinctive importance” (96-7).

Moreover, radical Christian humility is radical because it is grounded in and patterned after Jesus’s radical “life unto death” (97). Not only did Jesus the Son of God perform the ultimate act of humility in becoming incarnate—“emptying himself” (per Philippians 2:5-8)—but he also in his life “abandoned the quest for self-sufficiency and set out to expend himself unto death” (101). Dunnington says that Jesus possessed (and died with) no “heroic virtues” (of the sort celebrated in antiquity), nor did he possess or pursue any ego ideal, or proper pride. “He has no ego ideal because he has no interest in determining his own significance over and against that of the Father, and there is nothing in his psychological profile that could be rightly identified as ‘proper pride’” (113). Here, Dunnington also suggests that God himself, the Triune God, is “essentially humble”: the Trinitarian persons, who “are constituted *wholly* by their relations to one another,” are in turn “utterly free from the concern to establish a claim to their own distinctive being and importance over and against the others” (112). And so, the path to true human flourishing—eternal life with the

Triune God, “who is self-sacrificial love” (108)—requires imitating Jesus’s Trinitarian and cruciform life, so understood (once again) as “the archetype of perfected selfhood [and]... personal flourishing” (115).

At this point, I’ve covered enough ground in summarizing Dunnington’s “unselfing” account of humility to engage in some substantive analysis and critique. As a clarificatory exercise—specifying what radical Christian humility is and differentiating it from other accounts of humility, both historical and contemporary, Christian and non-Christian—Dunnington’s book largely succeeds. Dunnington does a particularly careful and thorough job “drilling down” into the concept of “self” so as to determine what aspect of the self—what Dunnington identifies as the “ego ideal”—radical Christian humility recommends “unselfing.” And he clearly distinguishes his “no concern” model of humility from “low concern” models of humility, which resemble “no concern,” but are still “committed to the crucial importance of the ego ideal as a necessary aspect of moral formation and the ongoing moral life” (94). He also distinguishes “no concern” humility from the aforementioned “standard account of Christian humility,” which recommends “humility-as-low-self-estimate” (19), grounded in the recognition of the asymmetry between humanity and divinity, human sinfulness, and the corresponding, ongoing need for divine grace. Dunnington nicely points out that while this account of humility—which says in essence “that we are small, despicable, and incapable” (20)—can be (and has been) “assimilated to a secular outlook” (26), radical Christian humility most definitely cannot.

To this point, Dunnington also effectively shows how radical Christian humility is buttressed by central Christian theological commitments. His goal here is “to offer an organized set of theological proposals that could make intelligible how a NO CONCERN view of humility...counts as a disposition of human flourishing” (97). However, I think that by offering these theological proposals, Dunnington goes beyond merely rendering his account intelligible; he defends it on specifically theological grounds. Since Jesus came to serve, and die, *for us*, out of love, and in complete submission *to the Father*, then in what sense could he possibly be understood as taking any interest in his *own* importance (maintaining any “ego ideal”)? And, insofar as Jesus is the Son of God, then doesn’t his life, defined by self-abandoning, other-regarding love, reveal who the Triune God essentially is, not only as perfectly loving but also perfectly humble (and radically so)? Doesn’t participating in God’s own life (which Jesus’s death and resurrection make possible), and so attaining the highest level of human flourishing (beatitude), therefore consist in becoming being like God in precisely this respect: being not only radically loving but also radically humble? These are the pressing questions that Dunnington’s probing theological reflection on (and defense of) radical Christian humility raise, and which those Christian virtue theorists who oppose (or wish to attenuate) Dunnington’s account of radical Christian humility must answer.

However, there are also aspects of his account that Dunnington more clearly could develop. Most notably, it would have been extremely helpful for Dunnington to discuss in more detail the relationship between Christian humility and Christian love, or charity. For example, regarding Thomas Merton and Simone Weil, he says, “[t]hey were trying to find their way into the state I have called radical Christian humility, wherein all concern for the self’s distinctive importance is gone and there is only the vision and love of God” (138). Does this mean, then, that “no concern” humility is ultimately an aspect of the love of God? Or, as Dunnington also suggests, does the love of God, manifest in the “trust that one’s well-being is entirely secured by the care of God” (88), provide the motivation for being humble?

Perhaps, also, this trust is not an aspect of one's love of God, but rather is unique to "no concern" humility. If so, Dunnington should make this clear.

Similarly, what is the precise relationship between *divine* humility and love? Dunnington says, for example, that "[t]he perichoresis of the Trinity is characterized by the complete donation of the being of one to the other" (111-12), in defending the claim that God is (or at least intelligibly can be construed as being) essentially humble. But one could argue in response, this claim about the perichoresis of the Trinity better supports or coheres with the more fundamental Christian claim that "God is love," not the claim that "God is humble." Is attributing humility to God, then, just another way of recognizing that God is love? And if so, is it genuinely illuminating or merely redundant (even if it is not patently false) to say that "God is humble," if God is essentially loving (or perfect love)?

It also would have been extremely helpful for Dunnington to spend more time discussing in what sense radical Christian humility is an infused, not acquired virtue. Dunnington makes this claim (rather suddenly) late in the book, as a way of relating "no concern" and "low concern" humility, and specifically addressing the objection (advanced by contemporary feminist thinkers) that engaging in successful moral formation requires proper pride and "a strong sense of self" (129). He writes, "LOW CONCERN is the acquired natural virtue of humility, and NO CONCERN is the infused natural virtue of humility" (130). In a footnote, Dunnington further claims that "[i]nfused humility is a natural, as opposed to a supernatural, virtue because of the way it builds upon and deepens a virtue that makes sense even apart from a view of the supernatural end" (130, footnote 6). However, this makes it sound like "low concern" humility is *necessary* for attaining true human flourishing—eternal beatitude—because without it, "no concern" humility could not take root. (Otherwise, there seems to be no point in calling "no concern" humility an infused *natural* virtue). But why couldn't God infuse "no concern" humility without there being any "low concern" humility present in a person for "no concern" humility to build upon and deepen—say, when God infuses charity? Furthermore, wouldn't a person who came to possess "no concern" humility cease to possess *any* "low concern" humility, which is still concerned with maintaining an ego ideal and a sense of pride in one's own personal importance? And so why, exactly, is it so important to try to acquire "low concern" humility (versus other virtues) if the goal is for it to be replaced by infused, "no concern" humility in the end?

In the conclusion of his book, Dunnington makes two important points that I would like to comment on in concluding this review. First, he urges his fellow Christian virtue theorists not to bracket their theological commitments when engaging the field, but rather to keep "those commitments front and center in an effort to show the difference Christ makes to everything, including the field of moral philosophy" (157). But then the question becomes, what difference *does* Christ really make to the field of moral philosophy, and philosophy more generally? The answer here, I think, is that the more Christ-centered philosophy is, the more truth-centered it is, since Christ is "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). And this is precisely why Christian virtue theorists, and Christian philosophers and theologians more broadly need to take Dunnington's book seriously. By developing an account of humility informed and supported by specifically Christian theological commitments, Dunnington has given Christian virtue theorists reason to think that this account of humility—radical Christian humility—is the true account, which consequently needs to be developed and defended further.

Granted, the kind of tradition-dependent reasoning Dunnington engages in to construct his account will not speak to or move everyone, and he says as much (“there is no reason to think the account will be widely attractive,” (161)). But of course, as I think Dunnington also realizes, *no* tradition-dependent reasoning of any sort—insofar as it is informed and supported by specific metaphysical and moral commitments—will speak to or move everyone. And so, secular virtue theorists should welcome and seriously consider Dunnington’s Christian contribution to virtue theory, not only because, as he rightly claims, it can help reveal their own underlying (and contestable) commitments about human beings and human flourishing “that typically go unstated and unexplored by many who think and write about the virtues” (158), but also because, as challenging as it may be, it just may elucidate what true humility is.

Here is my second main comment on Dunnington’s concluding thoughts and remarks in the book. In the book’s very last paragraph, he says, “This is an academic work, but its central questions are vital to a life of Christian faith. What does it mean to die to self? Could it be, and how could it possibly be, that dying to self is somehow for my good, as Jesus promises?” (164). I read Dunnington’s book during Lent, and am glad that I did, since it helped me think more deeply about what it means to die to self (and do so continually), so that I might therefore come to share more deeply in the life of God. It is rare that an academic work in theology makes me think more deeply about not just the Christian faith broadly, but also how I practice my own Christian faith. The fact that Dunnington’s very fine book caused me to do so gives me even further reason to recommend that others read it so that they too might “think about the nature and value of humility for Christian life” (164), especially their own lives.