

I

Introduction*Augustine's City of God on Humility and Pride*

I know ... what efforts are needed to persuade the proud how great is that virtue of humility which, not by dint of any human loftiness, but by divine grace bestowed from on high, raises us above all the earthly pinnacles which sway in this inconstant age.

Augustine, *The City of God* I, preface

In a remarkable way, therefore, there is in humility something which exalts the mind, and something in exaltation which abases it.

Augustine, *The City of God* XIV.13

Augustine's masterwork *The City of God* is the first major text in the history of Western thought to give humility and pride pivotal roles in its analysis. Written for Augustine's own tumultuous age, the book transcends its time as an enduring classic, engaging our human condition in ways that prompt readers to return to it in every era and amid a great variety of political societies and cultures. *The City of God* has exerted a profound influence on medieval, renaissance, modern, and contemporary thought, especially concerning politics, religion, and philosophy.

In this little book written about a great one, I invite students of politics and political philosophy – and all interested in human excellence, peace, and happiness – to explore with me Augustine's *City of God*, whether returning to it anew or encountering it for the first time, and to consider with special care its defense of virtuous humility (*humilitas*), an ennobling trait for humans rather than a humiliating condition. Augustine crafts his case in favor of humility's excellence, against the seductive pitfalls of pride (*superbia*), through a nuanced argument and narrative,

spanning twenty-two books and over a thousand pages. Elucidating and following the golden thread of humility amid the rich, variegated tapestry of *The City of God*, enabling the reader better to grasp humility's import and to weigh Augustine's copious argument on its behalf, is the humble, heartfelt task undertaken in this new book.

Augustine began writing *The City of God* about two years after Rome was sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths in AD 410, in response to his friend Flavius Marcellinus's request. Marcellinus was a government official stationed in North Africa. A Christian, he was finding it difficult to reply convincingly to arguments that the new religion had weakened the empire internally and left it without resources to resist growing external threats. This view of Christianity stood as an obstacle in the path of pagans otherwise open to considering the Gospel and the church; a case in point here was the distinguished Roman patriot Volusianus, another friend of Marcellinus and a refugee from Rome living in North Africa.¹ Augustine undertook Marcellinus's challenge by writing *The City of God* over some twelve years in his spare time as the busy bishop of the African port city of Hippo Regius. Augustine wrote for the sake of perplexed Christians in the Roman Empire, shaken as were their pagan fellows at the polity's palpable vulnerability. He wrote also for his pagan compatriots, whom he hoped to persuade to seek citizenship in the "heavenly city" – the city of God – and to show them that this was not incompatible with or prejudicial to their civic duties in an earthly polity. Augustine completed *The City of God* in AD 427, about three years before his death in AD 430, during the Vandals' assault on Hippo. Augustine succumbed then to illness that may have been brought on by famine and stress provoked by the protracted siege of his city.²

¹ On Volusianus, Marcellinus, and Augustine's decision to write *The City of God*, see Brown (2000, 297–302), Busch (2008, 9–13), and Lancel (2002, 391–96).

² As Lancel writes:

In the third month of the siege Augustine fell ill. He would have been seventy-six in the autumn, and privations and difficulties of all kinds undoubtedly hastened his end. Attacked by fever he retired to his room and did not move from it again.... At the start of the siege he had philosophically consoled himself by repeating these words of Plotinus which had already come to his lips at the time of the sack of Rome: "No great man would be greatly affected by the fact that stone and wood are collapsing and mortals dying." But at the hour of his death philosophy no longer sufficed. He asked for copies to be made of a few psalms dealing with penitence, so that when they were placed against the walls of his room he could read them from his bed. At last, on August 28, 430, Augustine rejoined Monica, Adeodatus, Nebridius, Severus, and several others in "Abraham's bosom." (Lancel, 2002, 474–75)

In penning *The City of God* as a lengthy apology (*apologia*, defense speech) for the Christian religion and indeed for the entire heavenly city against charges that they are prejudicial to social and civic life in this world, Augustine gives pride of place to a defense of virtuous humility. By the heavenly city, he refers to the society, anagogically (*mistiche*) speaking, of those in whom, thanks to the unmerited gift of divine love that they have freely welcomed, the love of God (*amor Dei*), rather than self-love (*amor sui*), acts as their chief motive and guide, if imperfectly so in this life (CG XV.1, 634, and XIV.28, 632).³ Augustine's emphasis on humility is apparent already in the preface:

In this work, O Marcellinus, most beloved son – due to you by my promise – I have undertaken to defend [the city of God] against those who favor their own gods above her Founder. The work is great and arduous; but God is our helper. I know, however, what efforts are needed to persuade the proud how great is that virtue of humility.... Thus, when the nature of the work here undertaken requires us to say something of it, and as occasion arises, we must not pass over in silence the earthly city also: that city which, when it seeks mastery, is itself mastered by the lust for mastery even though all the nations serve it. (CG I, preface, 3)⁴

In framing his “long and arduous” *City of God* as a defense speech and task of persuasion, Augustine employs the ample liberal arts and rhetorical education he received in his youth and polished in his first professional posts. These were positions of oratorical instruction, and thence, at the pinnacle of his rhetorical career, as an imperial orator in Milan. From these successes, the next step foreseen by Augustine and his family was a political appointment to a provincial governorship or higher post. With this promotion would come solid social and financial advancement for his family, of impoverished noble stock (*Confessions* [*Conf.*] III.3.6, 40; VI.11.19, 110).⁵

³ Cf. CG XI.1, 449: “We have learned that there is a city of God, *whose citizens we long to be because of the love with which its Founder has inspired us*” (emphasis added). For an account of the two loves that founded these two cities, emphasizing the relational and divinely given character of *amor Dei*, and so also understanding citizenship in this city in this life as a work in progress, a gift, task, and aspiration, and never an achievement, see Ogle (2021).

⁴ Quotations from *The City of God* are from R. W. Dyson's translation (1998), with occasional modifications, and are given by standard book and chapter numbers, followed by page numbers from the Dyson edition. Where given, Augustine's Latin text from *The City of God* and other works is from the *Opera Omnia CAG: Corpus Augustinianum Gissense* (2000).

⁵ Quotations from Augustine's *Confessions* are from F. J. Sheed's translation, Michael P. Foley, ed. (2006), and are given by standard book, chapter, and paragraph numbers, followed by the page number(s). For a study of “Pride and Humility” in Augustine's *Confessions*, see Baumann (2020).

Yet, as the tale Augustine tells in his *Confessions* clarifies, the liberal arts and rhetoric were not the sole content of his education.⁶ In his teenage years, reading Cicero's now-lost dialogue *Hortensius* enflamed the young Augustine with a desire for philosophical inquiry and wisdom (*Conf.* III.4.7–8, 40–41).⁷ The sophistical aspects of rhetoric in his era increasingly left him yearning for something more fulfilling and meaningful.⁸ At Milan, where he had to write discourses flattering imperial pride, Augustine read “some books of the Platonists” (*Conf.* VII.9.13, 126). These philosophical works led him to an abiding awareness of the excellence of the Platonic school and to a new conviction concerning the existence of spiritual being (see *Conf.* VII.7.11–17.23, 124–33). His disillusionment with sophistry and the rhetorical imperial politics of his day drew Augustine to the life of the mind, while his reading of Platonic philosophy led him beyond his previously held materialism (cf. *Against the Academicians* I.1.3–4). After an unforgettable incident in a garden adjacent to his lodging, when he heard a child's voice chanting *tolle et lege* (take and read) and chanced upon a passage of scripture that proved for him a channel of conversion and grace (*Conf.* VIII.12.28, 159), Augustine embarked on a months-long retreat of contemplation, discussion, and writing in the company of family and friends at a friend's villa in the town of Cassiciacum (*Conf.* IX.3.5, 166).⁹ He resigned his post as court rhetor and teacher of rhetoric, returning to Milan to prepare for and receive baptism “from Ambrose's hands” at the Easter Vigil in 387 (Lancel, 2002, 114; *Conf.* IX.5.13–6.14, 171–72). Augustine as we know him had been (re)born.

Decades later, just before he completed *The City of God*, Augustine elaborated a revised understanding of rhetoric, in book IV of his *On Christian Teaching* (*De doctrina christiana*, completed c. AD 426).¹⁰ In his view, the classical oratorical aims of delight and persuasion should be subordinated and ordered to rhetoric's third traditional task,

⁶ For studies of Augustine's thought reflecting on both *The Confessions* and *The City of God*, see Bathory (1981), Versfeld (1990), and Dodaro (1994).

⁷ See also *De trinitate* (*The Trinity*) XIV.5.26, and *Against the Academicians* I.1.4.

⁸ The period in which Augustine studied and taught rhetoric became known as the Second Sophistic. On oratory and its practice in this era, see Farrell (2008, 268) and Kennedy (1999, 47–52).

⁹ On Augustine's stay at Cassiciacum and the import of the dialogues he wrote there, see Boone (2016), Brown (2000, 108–20), Foley (1999, 2003), Lancel (2002, 99–111), and McFadden (2018).

¹⁰ For a volume that includes book IV of *De Doctrina Christiana* together with essays of scholarly commentary from various perspectives and disciplines on Augustine's rhetoric, see Enos et al. (2008).

teaching: speaking what is not merely pleasing or moving, but also, to the best of the speaker's knowledge, true, and with the ultimate goal of revealing and sharing truth as far and effectively as possible with one's interlocutors or audience (Fortin, 2008; Kabala, 2020).

With this in mind, and reflecting on Augustine's style of writing in *The City of God*, we may term his method and form of expression here *rhetorical dialectic*, understanding dialectic in a broadly classical sense.¹¹ As a work of rhetoric, *The City of God* aims explicitly at persuasion and so is rhetorical in a nonpejorative manner, at least in its author's aspiration. It aims also at defense and so takes on a courtroom context reminiscent of that in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*. As steeped also in dialectic,¹² rigorous inquiry starting from the shared perceptions inherent in common views and speech, giving rise to dialogue and debate examining presuppositions, unmasking errors, discerning definitions, and educating in truth, *The City of God* reflects and expresses the philosophical life as Augustine came to understand it. For him, philosophy comprises a love of wisdom that undertakes profound rational inquiry and opens ultimately to revelation and true religion.¹³ Dialectic is not a science with a specific

¹¹ For Augustine's specific mentions of dialectic (*dialectica*) in *The City of God*, see VIII.7, 322, and especially XXII.5, 1113:

Indeed, we shall find, if we consider it, that the manner in which the world came to believe is itself even more incredible [than the miraculous doctrine taught]. A few fishermen, uneducated in the liberal arts ... with no knowledge of grammar, *not armed with dialectic, not adorned with rhetoric*: these were the men whom Christ sent out with the nets of faith into the sea of the world. And in this way He caught all those fish of every kind, including – more wonderful still, because more rare – even some of the philosophers themselves. (Emphasis added)

Augustine judged it opportune to enlist his training in the liberal arts, grammar, and rhetoric, and his appreciation of dialectic, in the mammoth task of writing *The City of God*. He doubtless considered it a motive for humility that the evangelical fruits of his labor were sure to be much more modest than those of the far less educated and erudite apostles and disciples of the first Christian generation.

¹² For discussions of Cicero's understanding and uses, political and philosophical, of dialectic, which undoubtedly influenced Augustine's, see Crosson et al. (2015, 101–3) and Smith (2018, 140–41, 226–30). Crosson underscores parallels between Aristotelian and Ciceronian dialectic, while Smith emphasizes continuity between dialectic in its Socratic and Ciceronian forms. On Platonic dialectic, see Van Ophuijsen (1999, 292–313).

¹³ In his early dialogue *De ordine* (*On Order*), written during his stay at Cassiciacum, Augustine describes dialectic as the academic “discipline of disciplines.... Dialectic teaches how to teach and how to learn. In her, Reason shows herself and makes clear what she is, what she wants, what she is capable of. Dialectic knows what knowing is; it alone not only wants to make people know but is also able” (*De ordine* 2.38; quoted in Kenyon [2018, 118–19]). Kenyon notes that at Cassiciacum Augustine wrote a now-lost

subject matter, commencing from foundational rational principles; it is rather a mode of inquiry akin to an art and applicable to any subject matter. It is an essential form of conversation and study for politics and philosophy alike (Smith, 2018, 230). As Aristotle wrote, “[A] syllogism is ... dialectical (*dialektikos*) when it reasons from beliefs that are generally accepted (*endoxa*) ... which seem true to everyone or to the majority or to the wise (*sophoi*)” (Crosson et al., 2015, 101, quoting Aristotle, *Topics* 1.1, 100a25–100b23). As we will see, this mode of inquiry and exposition well describes Augustine's in *The City of God*.

In defending the heavenly city and its founder, Augustine endeavors whenever possible to begin from Rome's and other ancient polities' civic experience, history, culture, poetry, and epic narratives. From commonly held views, past and present, as well as from definitions and rational arguments accepted by prestigious philosophers of his and earlier eras, Augustine aims to establish a meaningful dialogue with pagan and Christian readers of the late Roman world. In our contemporary era, when tensions between secularist and religious, elite and “common” worldviews too often accompany and feed political polarization, Augustine's defense of virtuous humility and prosecution of vicious pride offer an example of a scholarly discourse during a troubled time that endeavors to bridge religious, intellectual, and cultural divides.¹⁴ How successful he was is a matter of debate, certainly, and how helpful he will be for us remains to be seen. Yet his was a worthy effort that impacted political, philosophic, and religious thought for centuries after his death, and continues to do so today. We might well, then, choose to accompany Augustine on his long trek across history, earth, and cosmos in *The City of God*, and see what in the end we can learn from this journey about humility and pride as they pertain to politics, philosophy, and religion. Such is the invitation offered to readers of this book.

Recent decades have seen a remarkable renewal of scholarship on Augustine's political thought and on his *City of God*. At the same time,

dialogue, *De rhetorica*, and may have planned or even begun another dialogue, *De dialectica* (Kenyon [2018, 129]). See also another of Augustine's Cassiciacum dialogues, *Against the Academics* (2019): “And by joining [the study of moral, natural, and divine matters] under dialectic, the foundress and judge, as it were, of those parts (dialectic is either wisdom itself or that without which wisdom can in no way be), Plato is said to have compiled the complete discipline of philosophy” (III.17.37; cf. III.29, 13, and trans. Michael Foley's commentary, *ibid.*, 184, 194–95).

¹⁴ For essays exploring what benefits contemporary citizens and scholars might gain from engaging Augustine's works in our current contentious era, see Kabala et al. (2021). For an earlier work on *The City of God and the Politics of Crisis*, see Brookes (1960).

several insightful studies have been published that treat humility and pride in political theory and the history of political thought. Why then this new book? Article-length studies on the topic wisely limit their studies to a particular aspect or angle of the theme: for example, pride vis-à-vis the common good (Markus, 1990); humility and true religion (Bobb, 2010); or Christ's humility and its impact on Augustine's account of humility in *The City of God* (Fitzgerald, 2014). To the best of my knowledge, no book-length study of *The City of God* has focused on its defense of humility against pride, a theme which, as we have seen, Augustine indicates in his preface to be crucial to his overarching intent. A recent monograph, *The Greatness of Humility: St. Augustine on Moral Excellence*, incorporates a broad range of sources, especially Augustine's *Sermons* and including *On Christian Teaching*, *On the Trinity*, *Confessions*, and other works, as well as *The City of God*, in its interpretation and argument (McInerney, 2016).¹⁵ Major recent works on humility and pride in the history of political theory have tended to highlight modern political philosophy rather than the late classical political thought of Augustine's era (Brooke, 2012; Cooper, 2013; Jacobson, 1978).

Two of these recent monographs, those by Julie E. Cooper and Christopher Brooke, commence their narratives of modern political theories of pride and humility precisely from Augustine and *The City of God*, indicating the milestone in the history of political thought that Augustine's defense speech on behalf of humility against pride constitutes, and its enduring import in the early modern era. These studies highlight problems perceived in Augustine's view (and/or those of his early modern interpreters), which some of the greatest modern minds in political theory have sought to isolate and address. In *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought*, Julie E. Cooper argues that Augustine leaves readers with a choice between stark binaries – philosophical pride versus Christian humility and human agency versus divine agency – that we would do well to overcome via new genealogies of humility and pride. As Cooper writes, “The humility/pride antithesis [in Augustine's *City of God*] tracks a series of oppositions.... Making subjection to God and self-direction mutually exclusive, these oppositions deny human sufficiency and discredit human initiative” (Cooper, 2013, 2; see also 23). On

¹⁵ Dodaro (2004) and Ogle (2021) also consider humility and pride in Augustine's political thought. Dunnington (2018, 29–46) offers an interpretation of Augustinian humility based on a reading of *Confessions*, and in dialogue with contemporary moral and religious philosophy.

Cooper's reading, Augustinian thought "conflates human agency with pride" (Cooper, 2013, 4).

In *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau*, Christopher Brooke engages Augustine's debates in *The City of God* with the Stoics on themes including human sinfulness and self-sufficiency (see Brooke, 2012, 1–11). Brooke writes:

The obvious mistake the Stoics make, from this Christian point of view, is to think that postlapsarian humans can live without being troubled by the disturbances [of irrational passion], and therefore without sin. Christians have it as an article of faith that they cannot, and therefore that the claim of the Stoics appears ridiculous, impious, and prideful, insofar as it denies human dependence on God. (Brooke, 2012, 10)

Although Brooke notes shortly after this quote that Augustine provides a philosophic challenge to these and related aspects of Stoicism (see Brooke, 2012, 11), the passage just quoted suggests a rather fideistic reliance on revelation in Augustine's critique.

These thoughtful accounts, each eminently worth engaging, draw their synopses of Augustine's views mainly from book XIV of *The City of God*,¹⁶ which together with book XIII investigates the primordial sin or fall of Adam and Eve narrated in the book of Genesis, and its enduring impact on humanity. The root of human evil evident in the Fall, argues Augustine in book XIV, is precisely vicious pride, *superbia* (CG XIV.13, 608–9; cf. XIV.14, 611).

Augustine indeed has much to say about pride and humility in the fourteenth book of his *City of God*. Book XIV constitutes a climax of Augustine's discussion of these themes, and so is an excellent choice of focus for brief treatments of the bishop of Hippo's thought on humility and pride, such as Brooke's and Cooper's.¹⁷ If we wish more fully to understand Augustine's thought on these crucial characteristics as expressed in his *City of God*, however, we need to read and consider the work as a whole. Augustine's magnum opus, we have noted, is comprised

¹⁶ Though not exclusively: Brooke refers to *The City of God* XII.22, ff. (see Brooke, 2012, 3), XIII.24 and XVIII.1 (3 and 210, notes 8–9), XIII.15 and XXII.30 (10–11 and 211, notes 47–48), and XXII.24 (95 and 228, note 99). Cooper also refers to a passage found in book XII of *The City of God* (see Cooper, 2013, 167, note 10).

¹⁷ McNerney (2016) also adopts this approach: "Although the theme of pride and humility is announced in the prologue of *The City of God* and runs throughout the course of that work, the relationship between the two receives its most explicit and systematic treatment in book XIV. In Chapter 4, I will provide an analysis of this text to highlight the themes Augustine presupposes and develops in relation to his understanding of humility and greatness" (12; cf. McNerney, 2016, 111–24).

of twenty-two books and more than a thousand pages. While readers have complained of Augustine's digressions and the seemingly random nature of some of the work's content, a close, sustained reading suggests a clear ordering and a unified argument in all its multiplicity – though perhaps with an occasional tangent! The work thus comprises a single, highly complex defense speech, and so we may reasonably expect that understanding Augustine's rhetorical dialectic concerning humility, pride, politics, and philosophy requires considering *The City of God* in its entirety.

The task of this book is to offer an interpretation of a crucial aspect of the argument of *The City of God*, considered in its entirety, through the lens of Augustine's defense of humility and prosecution of pride. Among the benefits of considering Augustine's rhetorical dialectic as a whole are an increased sense of the complexity of the "two cities" as they exist in this world or age and their intermingling, thus complicating the rigid binaries that scholars such as Cooper have noted; an appreciation of Augustine's emphasis on the relational, social nature of humility, before and beyond its epistemic aspects,¹⁸ and of humility's salubrious effects on human agency and action; and an increased appreciation of the natural, philosophical, and human-experiential components of Augustine's *apologia* for humility against pride.

At this juncture, readers may be wondering how Augustine defines humility and pride. After all, these concepts have had and do have varied, contested meanings within and across languages and cultures, and throughout the history of ethical, religious, and political thought. Augustine's own rhetorical dialectic in *The City of God* acknowledges a variety of versions of humility. One might say, paraphrasing Alexis de Tocqueville, that Augustine is interested in defending virtuous humility, "rightly understood," distinguishing it along the way from counterfeits or mistaken iterations. Augustine seeks to persuade readers that, paradoxically, a virtuous, ennobling form of this lowly quality does exist, and that it is wise to seek and cultivate it, in place of humility's demeaning variants. To borrow from Aristotle, one might say that, for Augustine, the quality known as humility is susceptible to excess and defect (see

¹⁸ Mark Button in his 2005 article offering an intellectual history of humility and arguing for its place in contemporary democratic theory and practice presents Augustine's humility as essentially a "virtue of self-knowledge" (Button, 2005, 850; cf. 843). While it is true that humility has crucial epistemological dimensions for Augustine, his account of this virtue (and of its foil, vicious pride) highlights even more deeply its metaphysical-existential and social-relational aspects, as this book will illustrate.

Nicomachean Ethics, 1104a11–26). Its excess – often, as Augustine suggests, still called “humility,” at least in Christian settings – consists of a disposition to lower oneself below people or other beings to whom or which one is in fact equal or superior. Humility’s defective condition veers by contrast toward, and at its extreme comprises, vicious pride.

What then is truly virtuous humility? Augustine does not offer readers a succinct or proper definition in *The City of God*, nor to the best of my knowledge, in any other work. Yet based on what he says about this trait throughout this long and arduous work, we can construct a provisional definition. Augustine’s humility is the virtue or excellence by which human beings willingly acknowledge their dependence on God and their essential equality with their fellow human beings and strive to live accordingly with right worship, justice, moderation, and mercy. As such, and as Augustine writes elsewhere, humility is the “dwelling place” of charity, of divinely given, freely received love of God and neighbor.¹⁹ Moreover, since the Christian religion affirms that “God is love” (*Deus caritas est*; 1 John 4:16), Augustine indicates in his preface and at various other points in *The City of God* that virtuous humility expresses and opens itself to the gifts of grace, godliness, and true deification or divinization.

Vicious pride, by contrast, resists rightful subordination to God and disdains equality with one’s fellow human beings. Pride is a desire for a “perverse kind of elevation” (CG XIV.13, 608), the “vice of exaltation” or “elation” (CG XIV.13, 609; XII.1, 498), whereby one makes oneself, individually or collectively, into an absolute principle or foundation of one’s being, and one’s own *telos*. Pride expresses at its core a seduction by and an aspiration to false or perverse forms of imitating God or divinization (cf. CG XIX.12, 936). Vicious pride propels to domination, war, and oppressive, inequitable peace (cf. CG XIX.12, 936). Humility well understood and practiced, by contrast, conduces to just rule and righteous forms of peace (see CG V.24, 232; XIV.28, 632; XIX.14, 940–42). Humility allows people to perceive better, appreciate affectively, and live

¹⁹ *Holy Virginitate* 51, in Augustine (1999, 207). Augustine’s Latin reads: *non ergo custodit bonum uirginale nisi deus ipse, qui dedit, et deus caritas est. custos ergo uirginitatis caritas; locus autem huius custodis humilitas* (chapter 52 in the CAG text of *De sancta uirginitate*). Augustine writes so extensively about humility in this work, that at the beginning of chapter 51, just before the passage quoted above, he observes, “At this point someone will say, ‘But this is not to write on virginity, but on humility’” (Augustine, 1999, 206). See also Augustine, *The Trinity* IV.1.2: “[God arranged things] so that the power of charity would be brought to perfection in the weakness of humility.”