

FOREWORD BY  
SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

# PRIDE

AND

HUMILITY

**AT WAR**

A Biblical Perspective

LANIER BURNS

“Lanier has given us a biblical understanding of pride and humility that few if any have taken such an effort to form. The thoroughness of his research throughout Scripture leaves little doubt that his surprising conclusions are on solid ground. Describing biblical humility as ‘aggression for God’ as seen in the life of Christ raises the bar of understanding that most of us have never considered. This is a book you will use often in ministry.”

—**Peter Deison**, Associate Pastor, Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas

“In a global culture consumed with the powerful and accomplished, Lanier Burns’s careful study of humility and pride helps reorient our social assumptions with deep biblical thought. Sweeping from Genesis to the New Testament exemplars of the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul, Burns urges believers to true humility in an engaged, God-centered life—a way of life that he well exemplifies.”

—**J. Scott Horrell**, Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“Too often we Christians exhibit pride in our interactions with others, both in the church and outside. Lanier Burns reminds us through a careful exposition of a host of biblical passages that humility is the way of our Lord Jesus Christ. This book not only informs us but, through a careful study of Scripture, leads to our personal transformation.”

—**Tremper Longman III**, Distinguished Scholar of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

“Dr. Lanier Burns, along with Dr. Howard Hendricks, has been one of the most sought-after professors at Dallas Theological Seminary. His integrity, his spiritual maturity, and his biblical insight make him more than qualified to pen *Pride and Humility*

*at War*. I am honored to call him a friend—one whom I’ve known since I was in his wedding over fifty years ago. While his professional and academic credentials are without question, I would like to commend him to you as one who genuinely practices what he preaches—with humility.”

—**Anne Graham Lotz**, Author, *The Daniel Prayer*

“For good reason, the early church fathers and the medieval scholastics regarded pride as the worst, most insidious of the seven deadly sins. Lanier Burns explains why—straightforwardly and with an eye to practicality that can disguise the profundity of his insight. The bad news is that pride infects us to the core of our depraved being; but the good news is that humility causes godliness to seep into all our thoughts and ways in counteractive redemption. Burns captures this dynamic and describes the sanctifying process in ways real and accessible. Of the many takeaways that this book offers, I probably most appreciated Burns’s matter-of-fact investigations of Moses, Job, and Jesus, who each uniquely illustrate that although humility may not prevent hardship, it will take one through hardship with greater godliness of character and greater closeness with God on the other side. Not every book inculcates godliness of character into the reader who meditates on its thesis—but this is one such book.”

—**R. Todd Mangum**, Clemens Professor of Missional Theology, Biblical Theological Seminary

“Lanier Burns has put us in his debt by producing a carefully researched and thoroughly biblical study. Years of teaching and theological reflection are evident throughout and enrich the work with depth and maturity. It is particularly gratifying to have a substantive study—not something trite and trivial—that puts the heel of its boot squarely on the neck of self-promotion

and pride: a 'new virtue' that threatens our lives and churches. Read it and find 'the way of wise living, godly significance, and eternal meaning in a dying world.' I recommend it with fear and trembling."

—**Jay Smith**, Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary



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J. LANIER BURNS



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To my students, who have encouraged me to write this book  
on a most difficult subject,  
especially the Brians, Bain and Bittiker,  
who have taken the words and example of the Lord to heart



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## Foreword

IN HIS EARLY years as a maturing theologian, John Calvin encountered some striking words tucked away in a letter Augustine of Hippo had written in A.D. 410. They “delighted” the young reformer:

When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, “Delivery”; what was the second rule, “Delivery”; what was the third rule, “Delivery”; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, “Humility.”<sup>1</sup>

It might seem strange, therefore, that so little extensive study, writing, and perhaps teaching and preaching have focused on humility. Scholars might point to the older influence of Thomas

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.2.11. The reference is to Augustine’s letter. Calvin had just turned thirty when he first embedded the quotation in earlier editions of his *Institutes*. The “certain rhetorician” is a reference to Demosthenes.

Aquinas, who specifically rejected the view that humility is a cardinal virtue and “reduced” its significance by treating it as a species of modesty, which he in turn saw as a subset of temperance.<sup>2</sup> But the real reason probably lies much closer to home. For who possesses the humility that would seem to be a prerequisite to teaching others about humility? Humility is also no more valued in the contemporary world than it was in the culture of the Roman Empire when it was first invaded by the gospel. Nor is this true only of the world. Indeed, one could be forgiven for wondering if at least parts of the evangelical church today fall foul of Luther’s critique of the medieval church. They thirsted for a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*) rather than a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*)—seeking “influence” and “image” just as we have self-promoted through public and social media. Humility has hardly been front and center on the evangelical agenda.

Now, thankfully, Professor Lanier Burns has come to our help in this splendid biblical-theological and pastoral-theological study. He begins in the right place—by presenting himself not as one who has mastered his subject but as a fellow-learner, who sits beside us and follows with us on the biblical road map that provides the directions we need. He thus unconsciously illustrates the humility of mindset and approach that we need if we are to make progress in the Spirit. And while *Pride and Humility at War* is a patient biblical study, sensitive to the value of careful technical exegesis (as the footnotes make clear), it is written in a style that should appeal to every reader. As a result, Dr. Burns “allows” God’s Word to speak for itself (if we may so speak) and to do its own work in us as we read it.

What C. S. Lewis once wisely wrote to an aspiring young author applies equally to aspiring teachers and preachers: we

2. In his *Summa Theologiae*, 2.2 Q.161.

should never tell our audience *how they ought to feel* about something, but rather describe that something in a manner that will lead them to feel that way. It is all very well to be told that humility is a key virtue or that we ought to be humble. But the question is “How?” The contemporary Christian world has a tendency to leave the question either unanswered (“Work out for yourself how to do it”) or artificially answered (“Here are the five things you need to do”). But the sad truth is that anything we can do is not likely to promote humility! We too easily forget the focus of our Lord’s prayer: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). When God’s Word is patiently unfolded, it both brings light and does its own work in us, transforming us by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2).

It is this approach—the Jesus and Paul Method, as it were—that Dr. Burns employs so successfully, unfolding the teaching of Scripture stage by stage from the patriarchs to the apostles. In *Pride and Humility at War* he comes to us as a servant—not only of the Word of God incarnate and in Scripture but also of the people of God. In doing so he invites us to grow in grace with him—growing downward into the presence of God so that we will grow upward in likeness to Christ. This book is a love gift to the church and breathes the spirit of an author who comes to us saying, “The Lord Jesus has given me this to share with you.” May the “loaves and fishes” he brings here be blessed, broken, and multiplied in our lives!

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Reformed Theological Seminary





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TO MY FRIENDS at P&R Publishing, who have allowed me to take the time and freedom to ponder things that have stretched me to the limit.

To Collin Huber, who generously helped to prepare the manuscript for publication.

And to my beloved wife of fifty years, who read the manuscript and insisted that humility is important and must be applied to our daily struggles and challenges.



## Abbreviations

BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ESV	English Standard Version
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LXX	Septuagint
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976–93)
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , 4 vols., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976)
NIV	New International Version

Abbreviations

OTL	Old Testament Library
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press)
<i>TDNT</i>	Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , 10th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984)
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973–74)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism

# 1

## Introduction

CONSCIENTIOUS CHRISTIANS ARE in daily battles with easily besetting temptations, misplaced priorities, alluring compromises, and broken relationships in a world that weakens them with its complexities, options, stresses, and seductive values. A student recently told me that pride had caused him endless frustration and anxiety. He was afraid that he would not be able to find a place of significance in this life, that he would disappoint the expectations of his family—a fear that he would have to cheat to get ahead. These struggles to understand and achieve some victory over vices are as old as history, and we seem to be as far as ever from answers and relief. They are formative elements of our identity and sourced from our heart, the center of our ambitions and decisions. What are the sources and causes of these struggles in our midst? Why do we achieve our goals with a nagging sense of disappointment after discovering that it was not what it seemed when we started? The consensus of the Bible and the history of Christian doctrine points to a perennial cause at the center of human life: the conflict between pride and humility. C. S. Lewis referred to these opposites as

“that part of Christian morals where they differ most sharply from all other morals. . . . The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit: and the virtue opposite to it, in Christian morals, is called Humility.”<sup>1</sup>

The virtues in general and humility in particular have fallen on hard times in the modern world. Even people who try to follow Christ are uneasy about humility, though they know that God promised blessing for the humble. It seems so weak in a world that honors power and bravado. Pop psychology has identified humility as an enemy of self-esteem; oppressed minorities feel that it is a ploy to dismantle their bid for entitlements; some philosophers and theologians have tried to affirm a “will to power” as the only way that will succeed in the world. Everywhere we turn, we compare ourselves with others around us. Competitiveness has been built into all of the institutions in the modern world. The focus has shifted from families to corporations, and modern social sciences quantify success and significance by status and rank. Competitive ranking begins with grades in grammar school. The military ranks with stripes and ribbons. The business world uses titles, salaries, bonuses, and office space to signify value and worth. The issue is performance in a hierarchy of power. Small wonder that modernity has exposed disappointments, depression, and even suicide, since marketing is geared to a small circle of elites and winners. All of my life I have been taught that “man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (true humility). But all of my life I have observed that we live for greater profits and our own pleasure until we die (true pride). According to the Bible, the church is a family where artificial distinctions are melted by God’s grace and a common bond in Jesus Christ, hence “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 121.

nor female” (Gal. 3:28). The world has persuaded us that pride is natural—to the point that we think of ourselves in terms of our superiority over others, and our agenda is to control them to our advantage. Without careful thought humility seems so often unrealistic, impractical, or demeaning—really not a virtue for this time and place.

My interest in this subject began a number of years ago, when I encountered stunning statements that contradicted the obvious ways of the world. First of these was “the last will be first.” I did not know of a single champion or hero who thought this way in any field: athletics, business, politics, education, science, or any other professional commitment. Self-interest, we are told, is the engine that runs the world. It is an undeniable motivator as evidenced by the single-minded devotion of people who train sacrificially every day to be the mythical “best” in their passion or expertise. The problem with the improbable promise of “winning by losing” is that it was made by Jesus Christ, meaning that sincere Christians must come to terms with it.

Second, I encountered comprehensive statements by noteworthy Christians that, if correct, demanded careful reflection. Their weightiness challenged common views of Christianity. For example, Andrew Murray wrote, “Humility, the place of entire dependence on God, is, from the very nature of things, the first duty and the highest virtue of man. It is the root of every virtue. And so pride, or the loss of this humility, is the root of every sin and evil.”<sup>2</sup> Is humility not one of many virtues? How do we demonstrate that it is the root of every virtue? Similarly, Jon Bloom has written about the opposing vice of pride. “Pride turns ambition selfish, perverts sexual desire into unspeakable lusts, interprets net worth as self-worth, infects the wound of grief and loss with the bacteria of bitterness, and twists competition

2. Andrew Murray, *Humility* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), 16.



into conquest.”<sup>3</sup> Is this not confusing pride with a panoply of evils? What is this vice that robs life of joy?

Third, fifty years in ministry have taught me that humble servants of Christ have enjoyed remarkable significance in the Lord’s family. Of course, biblical examples, especially our Lord, are oft cited and well known. “One Solitary Life” poetically celebrates our Savior, who “did none of the things usually associated with greatness,” nevertheless, he “is the central figure of the human race” and affected life on earth more than all armies, parliaments, and kings.<sup>4</sup> But was the Lord great by worldly standards? Was he not “solitary” and crucified? We can observe that Christian service has been distinguished by people whose “small” ministries to the hungry, abandoned, and sickly will be commended by the King. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). I am sure that many of these are people that I have known in business, on mission fields, or in churches—anywhere a deep and lasting impact has been made in God’s family by loving brothers and sisters. Probably we have all seen authentic humility in people we most admire.

How do we define humility and pride so that we can align our lives with biblical priorities? The Greeks and Hellenists, who profoundly influenced Western traditions, thought of humility as lowly, insignificant, weak, poor, or servile. In their culture humility was excessively base, deficient, and without pleasure. It was almost always used when speaking disparagingly of people or cities, who usually used obsequious behavior to curry favors. Aristotle (ca. 300 B.C.) in his *Nicomachean Ethics* argued that humility hindered the development of virtue. Humiliated people

3. Jon Bloom, “Don’t Let Pride Steal Your Joy!,” *Revive* 46, 2 (2015): 14.

4. A number of versions of “One Solitary Life” have been adapted from James Allan Francis’s sermon “The Real Jesus,” in *The Real Jesus and Other Sermons* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1926).

and cities displayed their weakness and lack of virtue by their condition, which was epitomized by slavery.

The highest aim of humanity was happiness, which differed among “the wise” (privileged) and the “majority” (unprivileged). The common good of happiness was to be pursued over one’s lifetime through the active exercise of the soul in conformity with the virtues. So the right activity reflected a moderate pride that held one’s head high in all circumstances; a willful self-sufficiency; and a stable disposition among family, friends, and city. However, excessive pride was an overweening vice in which one sought inappropriate (or excessive) honor and acclaim.<sup>5</sup>

In the aristocratic culture of ancient Greece, the worth of men was determined by parentage, and a virtue (ἀρετή) was an inherited ability that enabled them to function well in society: civically, militarily, and morally. It was reflected in excellence of performance and nobility of character. This is illustrated in virtues like *magnificence*, which mandated large contributions from abundant wealth, and *magnanimity*, in which the great-souled acknowledged the lofty honor that came with their possession of all the virtues. They could be truthful about their greatness and unconcerned about the excesses of boastfulness or self-depreciation. The notion of divine standards of human morality, the foundation of biblical ethics, was absent for the Greeks. The society of gods merely replicated human drives and behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

Though some like Socrates held that virtues could be taught,

5. “Unlike the ὕβριστής, who acts violently in spite of divine and human law, and the ἀλαζών, the empty boaster who deceives himself and others by making the most of his advantages, abilities and achievements, the ὑπερήφανος is the one who with pride, arrogance and foolish presumption brags of his position, power and wealth and despises others.” *TDNT*, s.v. “ὑπερήφανος,” by Georg Bertram, 8.525. This is the excess beyond the moderate mean. Plato contrasts honorable, respectable citizens with the arrogant, who are puffed up and annoying.

6. See Robert Payne, *The Wanton Nymph: A Study of Pride* (London: Heinemann, 1951).

nothing changed their pervasively negative view of humility. The possibility of teaching virtue was predicated on a distinction between intellectual virtues (teachable) and moral virtues (innate character). Epictetus distinctively taught that there is a common humanity that merits friendly relationships, but humility for him remained negative as a petty, inferior disposition.<sup>7</sup> Then ταπεινός was rarely used to mean obedience; it referred to adaptation to one's place in state, army, and family to maintain order. It involved a pride in status, not abasement—a necessary means to avoid the chaos of extreme behaviors by the underprivileged. Absent was any suggestion of the last becoming first.

Theologians in the Middle Ages generally attempted to balance biblical teaching with the views of Hellenism. Christianity had at least three traditions with a bearing on our understanding of humility and pride. First, Pelagius (ca. A.D. 400) rejected original sin (Augustinian depravity) and affirmed that people had been created with an ability to live sinlessly, a condition that continued after the fall. He could not accept human frailty as an excuse for the immorality that he observed. God may assist virtuous living, but people were blameworthy for choosing pride (or arrogance) when they didn't have to.

Second, Augustine (ca. A.D. 400) opposed Pelagius by teaching human depravity and the inability of people to live virtuously apart from the grace of God. His *Confessions* (A.D. 378) frequently contrasts pride and humility.<sup>8</sup> Pride was the character trait of the unconverted, and humility was the foundational virtue of the church. Augustine defined pride as the creature's refusal to submit to God, that is, as rebellion. He held that God ordered his creation so that one could not escape his sovereign presence. Thus, evil angels and people were caught in a self-destructive vortex, in which they turned inward to find purpose and feed on

7. *Dissertationes*, 3.24.

8. See also *De trinitate* (ca. A.D. 415) and *De civitate Dei* (ca. A.D. 425).

themselves in search of satisfaction. Only a humble believer, he held, could follow Christ. Humility was not in the first instance an attitude toward oneself, but rather a willingness to let God be supreme, with consequent love for other people. In other words, humility meant dependence on God's enablement, gratitude for his gracious blessings, acceptance of Christ's example as the only normative guide in this life, and faithful practice of contrition for one's sins.

Third, Thomas Aquinas (ca. A.D. 1240) is known for his attempt to synthesize Aristotelian philosophy ("the Philosopher" in the *Summa*) and Christian principles. He discussed humility in depth in his *Summa Theologica Secunda Secundae*, Q. 161. He frequently agrees with Augustine and cites him in conjunction with a number of other early Fathers. As a theological virtue (versus civic ability), humility is the foundation of Christian spirituality. As the opposite of pride, it is based on worshipful subjection to God and "comprehends the whole of Christian teaching," notably Christ's humility in providing salvation. Reverence for God should lead to one's subjection to all neighbors for his sake. Humility is also the inward moderation and restraint of passions and appetites (under the broader heading of temperance).<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, a number of theologians developed depravity on a trajectory of the worthlessness of the sinner, which affected perceptions of humility in a very negative way. Benedict of Nursia (ca. A.D. 540) founded Western monasticism and formulated his Rule to promote the abdication of self-will to fight for "our true King." The steps to truth are humility, compassion, and contemplation. Benedict defined humility as "a virtue by which man acquires a low view of himself because he knows himself

9. In Roman Catholic tradition the cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Humility is annexed to temperance, which is primary in the restraint of inordinate desires.

well.” His practices included twelve degrees of humility, the first of which was “always having the fear of God before one’s eyes” as evidenced in strict obedience. The seventh degree was “not only with his tongue but also in his inmost soul believeth, that he is the lowest and vilest of men . . . saying with the Prophet, ‘But I am a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people.’”<sup>10</sup> The degrees, as we would expect, were to be understood in terms of monastic life. The first six involve contempt for fellow monastics; the next four contempt for one’s superiors; and the last two contempt for God. For Benedict, contempt is synonymous with pride.

Anselm of Canterbury (ca. A.D. 1100) lived most of his adult life in the Benedictine order. Like Benedict, he thought of humility as a staged progression, only with seven levels instead of Benedict’s twelve. These are recorded in his *De Similitudinibus* and *De Anselm* (esp. chap. 1). His progression was from the valley of pride, which was “the depth of human vice,” up the “mountain of humility,” which was necessary for the attainment of other moral virtues. The prize at the summit was virtuous self-knowledge. The vices reflected ignorance of one’s unworthiness. The levels of humility proceed from the acknowledgment that one is contemptible up to “loving contemptible treatment from others.”<sup>11</sup>

One problem among many is that this view of self-hatred is not humility as presented by the Bible and biblically oriented Christian traditions. If humility is contrition over our sinful condition, then Jesus could hardly have been its exemplar. In spite of sin, “God so loved the world” (John 3:16) that he humbled

10. Benedict, *Rule*, rev. ed., trans. Boniface Verheyen (Atchison, KS: St. Benedict’s Abbey, 1949), chap. 7, first and seventh degree.

11. A further example of worm theology is Walter Hilton’s *The Stairway of Perfection*, trans. M. L. Del Mastro (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 80–81: “First of all, this is how you must practice humility. You must be unable to dwell among men and unworthy to serve God in conversation with his servants. . . . You shall judge yourself more foul and more wretched than any creature alive.” Hilton was a fourteenth-century mystic.

himself to save it. Ironically, the notion of self-hatred encourages attitudes and activities that easily gravitate toward pride: a “superior” inferior view of oneself in comparison with fellow believers.

Fifth, Martin Luther expressed Augustinian depravity as *in se curvatos* and represents the views of major Reformers. After the fall the human spirit “curved in on itself” for vain self-glorification and pride. In his words,

It is easy to understand how in these things we seek our fulfillment and love ourselves, how we are turned in upon ourselves and become in grown at least in our heart, even when we cannot sense it in our actions . . . our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself because of the viciousness of original sin . . . nor can he be freed of his perversity . . . except by the grace of God.<sup>12</sup>

Noteworthy here is the inward curve of the original sin of pride, which could only be healed by the grace of God.

The Western view of the human condition took a radical turn away from Christian traditions to the European Enlightenment. Scientific research and naturalistic philosophy were enlarged into intellectual forces. The Catholic Church aided the changes with censorial responses to views that challenged its authority. This change to modernity (ca. seventeenth century to the present) has been insightfully described by Robert Solomon:

In much of Western tradition, the central demand of modern philosophy is *the autonomy of the individual person*. This means that each of us must be credited with the ability to ascertain what is true and what is right, through our own thinking and

12. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 25, 245, 291, 313.

experience, without depending upon outside authority: parents, teachers, popes, kings, or a majority of peers. . . . What it means is that whether you believe in God or not, for example, must be decided by you, by appeal to your own reason and arguments that you can formulate and examine by yourself. . . . This stress on individual *autonomy* stands at the very foundation of contemporary Western thought. We might say that it is our most basic assumption.<sup>13</sup>

Solomon's summarizing statement profoundly describes contemporary thought and the intellectual move from ecclesial tradition to secular individualism. This, in turn, effected a change in how pride and humility came to be viewed. Pride became a virtue, and humility became a vice. The world of traditional values was turned upside down.

Friedrich Nietzsche best illustrates this exaltation of pride (1844–1900). He wanted to revive classical ethics and remove the self-deceptions of the church. He stated that humility had really been a strategic device to topple people who were dominant and powerful in society. It was a slave morality that promoted lowliness and weakness to make the naturally virtuous attainment of power and flagrant self-approval appear flawed. In reality one doesn't win by losing. For Nietzsche, humility is despicable because it hypocritically seeks to exalt itself by pointing to the guilt of the privileged. The "natural attitude" is pride as arrogant self-promotion to attain as much personal power as possible.<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche represents the philosophical shift, but other writers illustrate how deeply the transformation affected the cultural

13. Robert C. Solomon, *Introducing Philosophy: A Text with Integrated Readings*, 9th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16–17.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968). See also Robert Solomon, ed., *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1973), especially chapter 8 by Philippa Foot, "Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values."

milieu. Ayn Rand, for example, used the lengthy speech of the god-like John Galt to explain her “Objectivist Philosophy”:

The real world is not the product of your sins, it is the product and the image of your virtues. . . . Pride is the recognition of the fact that you are your own highest value, and, like all of man’s values, it has to be earned—that of any achievements open to you, the one that makes all others possible is the creation of your own character—that your character, your actions, your desires, your emotions are the products of the premises held by your mind—that . . . he must acquire the values of character that make his life worth sustaining—that as man is a being of self-made wealth, so he is a being of self-made soul—that to live requires a sense of self-value, but man, who has no automatic values, has no automatic sense of self-esteem and must earn it by shaping his soul in the image of his moral ideal, in the image of Man, the rational being he is born able to create, but must create by choice—that the first precondition of self-esteem is that radiant selfishness of soul which desires the best in all things . . . a soul that seeks above all else to achieve its own moral perfection.<sup>15</sup>

Rand underscored the virtues of autonomy and pride (self-sufficiency and self-centeredness) in creating the modern world of virtue. She denied God and grace: “you are your own highest value” and “you have to earn it.” We must create not only our resources but also our character. The moral ideal, turning the *imago Dei* into unreality, is Man, who must be generated from a “radiant

15. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1957), 936, 946–47. Rand continued to quote her Galt speech in explaining her position. In a University of Wisconsin Symposium on “Ethics in Our Time” she delivered a paper entitled “The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), 27: “To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man’s highest moral purpose.*”



selfishness.” This is an explicit denial of biblical and traditional values; in this cruel world may the best and fittest survive.

A similar but less caustic presentation of the same emphasis was made in Robert Ringer’s best-selling *Looking Out for #1*. He cited Aristotle’s goal of happiness as a universal priority and agreed with “John Galt’s” philosophy.<sup>16</sup> His admonition was “to forget foundationless tradition, forget the ‘moral’ standards others may have tried to cram down your throat, forget the beliefs people may have tried to intimidate you into accepting as ‘right.’”<sup>17</sup> His dedication to Number One is important “because it leads to a simple, uncomplicated life in which you spend more time doing those things which give you the greatest amount of pleasure,” which is “to feel good.”<sup>18</sup> Always remember, he emphasized, “that happiness is that which makes you feel good.”<sup>19</sup> To do this a person must win as often as possible by whatever means. His nemesis is “the Absolute Moralist, the creature who spends his life deciding what is right for you. . . . If he believes in Christ, he’s certain that it’s his moral duty to help you ‘see the light.’”<sup>20</sup> Reality is, and no one should speculate about what it ought to be. “No other living person has the right to decide what is moral (right or wrong) for you.”<sup>21</sup> Ringer advocates absolute autonomy and no accountability before God: there is no right way to live. So he summarily dismisses humility as an accurate assessment of oneself and canonizes pride with Self as “Number One.” Ringer brings us full circle from classical philosophers without apparent awareness of their objection to obnoxious arrogance and the absence of a sense of civic responsibility. He dismisses

16. Robert J. Ringer, *Looking Out for Number #1* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1977), 14. Ringer also wrote *Winning through Intimidation*.

17. Ringer, *Looking Out for Number #1*, 8.

18. *Ibid.*, 12.

19. *Ibid.*, 17.

20. *Ibid.*, 20.

21. *Ibid.*

the cautionary tales of ecclesial traditions about the need for humility in community and the destructiveness of pride. In other words, how can life bring pleasure if your Number One is at war with everyone else's Number One? If history has demonstrated anything, it has shown that sinners have agreed about very little except that we do not want God to govern our lives or the world. Ringer joins Rand and Nietzsche in a naïve assumption that liberated people in a valueless world will address the deep needs of humanity such as salvation, justice, peace, and joy, which have been elusive to this point.

We have journeyed from ancient to modern times attempting to define humility and pride. We have seen that each generation gravitates to meanings in accordance with their social and cultural contexts. A bewildering array of meanings has resulted in a confusing kaleidoscope of nuances. Can we use *humility* and *pride* in a coherent way that will enhance mutual understanding of their contrast?

We close this discussion with definitions from an English dictionary.<sup>22</sup> *Virtue* is defined as moral excellence and righteousness, such as patience; an effective or beneficial quality; an advantage; an effective force or power; and ability to produce a definite result. Note that virtue is a purely human trait with not even an inference that God is relevant. No mention is made about whether a virtue is innate or acquired, though we could assume that the definition would include both. A virtuous person is righteous, effective, and skilled—"successful" perhaps captures the sense. *Humility* is meekness or modesty in behavior, attitude, or spirit; low in rank or quality; degradation. The verbal forms mean to lower in pride, dignity, or self-respect; to disgrace. We should note that the meanings range from a neutral modesty to a negative

22. For this purpose we have used *The American Heritage® College Writer's Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), hoping that this kind of dictionary may come closest to public parlance.

degradation with loss of dignity or self-respect. The weight of the equivocation is in the direction of negative and undesirable. *Pride* is a sense of one's proper dignity and self-respect; pleasure or satisfaction taken in an achievement or association; a source of pleasure or satisfaction; the best of a group; and an excessively high opinion of oneself or conceit. We note that, as with humility, different meanings are assigned to the same concept. It seems that the ambiguity of historical uses of the contrast has found its way into the dictionary. When does proper dignity slide into conceit in a modern setting where the shift has been explicitly made? The definitions seem to agree with classical emphases on one's proper place in social orders without obnoxious braggadocio. A modern meaning enters when pleasure and satisfaction come from being the best of a group.

We cannot examine in detail concepts that range from denigration to exaltation, from humanistic virtues to God-oriented enablement, from an ability not to sin to innately proud, from self-hatred to self-worship, and also include the pivotal reversal of humility/pride as virtue/vice and vice/virtue respectively. What is a realistic goal for this study? The history of interpretation has surfaced a number of questions that are worthy of extended discussion. However, the greater need is a thorough analysis of how the Bible uses pride and humility. This is our goal. Hopefully, this analysis will serve as a center to orient the incredible diversity of views and the centrality of God to any discussion of the subject. Our discussion of the Bible will begin with the Pentateuch and progressively trace the contrast through blocks of Scripture, culminating in the New Testament Epistles. Chapters on the Wisdom Literature and the Prophets will lay the foundation for the difficult discussion of the contrast between pride and humility in the Gospels. Jesus Christ was the primary expositor and exemplar of a godly understanding of humility, and we would do well to embrace him as our guide on this pilgrimage.

## Summary

We have surveyed various views of humility and pride through history to show their different meanings, from denigration to conceit. From the beginnings of human history, virtues and vices have had social connotations that promote community or divisions and war. Even without explicit biblical emphases, God (or the gods) emerge as vital for any discussion. In the Bible God is the standard by which humility and pride are defined and discerned. Indeed, they can be important entry points for thinking about the notion of covenant in God's relationship with his people. Humility is submissive dependence on the Lord on his terms, while pride is rebellion against God's covenantal guidelines.

## Key Terms

**automatic.** In anthropology, an innate or intuitive response to circumstances.

**autonomy.** The assumption that an individual is free to make judgments and decisions apart from outside authorities (such as God).

**bravado.** Boastfulness or bragging about one's accomplishments or character.

**ensorial.** Judgmental assessment of content that is objectionable to moral standards, usually involving punishment.

**criterion.** A standard by which a judgment is made.

**ecclesial.** Pertaining to church matters.

**Enlightenment.** The European movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that emphasized reason and autonomy rather than tradition and revelation.

**heart.** In the Bible this stands for the center of the person and the matrix for thinking about our place in family and society.

The equivalent today is the brain as biological center of the person.

**Hellenism.** The culture of ancient Greece.

**intuitive.** Instinctive acceptance of truth without conscious reasoning.

**mythical.** Concepts or ideas that are characteristic of cultures, often concerning idealized values.

**natural philosophy.** The belief that only natural laws and forces operate in the world as opposed to transcendent or supernatural forces such as God.

**significance.** Worthy of attention, social importance.

**vice.** A human practice or habit that characterizes evil, degrading, or immoral behavior.

**virtue.** A human practice or habit that characterizes moral excellence or a beneficial character trait.

## Questions for Discussion

1. When we speak of humility and pride as the sources of righteousness and evil respectively, what does the metaphor of a “root” mean?
2. Why is personal worth always tied to wealth throughout history?
3. Humility was regarded as servile in ancient cultures. Why was “servant” a title of honor in the New Testament (Rom. 1:1; James 1:1)?
4. Is our goal in life “to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever”?<sup>23</sup>
5. What was Augustine’s view of humility and pride, and why is his view suitable as a prelude for the rest of the book?
6. How can self-denigration, so-called worm theology, lead to pride?

23. WSC Q.1.

7. How does Ringer's modern preference for pride differ from the views of classical philosophers?

### **For Further Reading**

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. 1952. Reprint, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. Chapter 8 is one of the best introductory presentations on pride and humility.

Ramm, Bernard L. *Offense to Reason: A Theology of Sin*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985. Ramm condenses a broad survey of the subject into a few readable chapters. The middle of the book, the center and "root" of sin, is particularly noteworthy.