

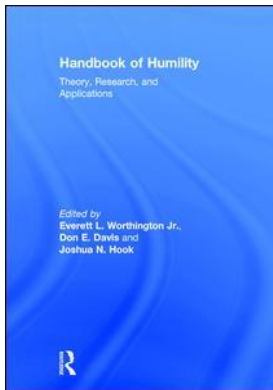
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HUMILITY FROM A PHILOSOPHICAL POINT OF VIEW

Robert C. Roberts and W. Scott Cleveland

Both the nature and value of humility are controversial in philosophy. Diverse and contrary definitions of humility abound. Some hold it to be a hindrance to a good life, whereas others hold it to be essential. Without denying the intuition of many that the word humility can be and is used by some people to denote a state of chronic shame or low self-esteem, lack of ambition, obsequiousness, servility, or small-mindedness (so there are kinds of humility that are character defects), we will here offer and defend an account of humility as an admirable, valuable trait. We will situate our view vis-à-vis rival views, most of which also take humility to be a virtue. Clarity about the nature of humility is vital for empirical research into the topic, and providing such clarity is the essentially philosophical part of empirical research into the trait.

Defining Humility

The virtue of humility is intelligent lack of concern for self-importance, where self-importance is construed as conferred by social status, glory, honor, superiority, special entitlements, prestige, or power. Let us explain this definition.

We think that the handiest way to get to the concept of humility as a virtue is to focus on what we call the vices of pride. Traditionally, humility has been thought of as the contrary of pride. The Christian tradition, for example, has sometimes conceived pride as the chief of all sinful dispositions and humility as the opposite, as though the humble person can have no pride and the proud person no humility. David Hume (1888) also opposes humility and pride, but reverses the Christian evaluation, making pride the good thing and humility a kind of vice (one of the “monkish virtues”); Tara Smith, a contemporary disciple of Ayn Rand (see Rand, 1964), does something similar (Smith, 1998). We think that this black-and-white thinking about humility and pride is misconceived and that there are both good and bad traits that are called humility and good and bad traits that are called pride. There is not only vicious pride, but also such dispositions as pride in one’s work (the contrary of slovenliness);

self-confidence (a can-do, will-to-be-heard attitude); authoritativeness in leadership; a sense of dignity; pride in one's country, family, and children; aspiration to worthy ends; and no doubt others. These might be called the virtues of pride. The vices of pride, by contrast, include conceit, invidious pride (the pleasant counterpart of envy), vanity, arrogance, hyperautonomy (aspiring to be self-made), self-righteousness, haughtiness, and domination (the disposition to lord it over others). We think the virtue of humility is just the absence of the vices of pride. Sometimes we are asked how a *virtue* can be merely the *absence* of something bad. We think it's somewhat like the absence of a flu virus: it's just an absence, but a very desirable one because health is such a good thing.

What do all the vices of pride have in common? What do people with the vices of pride all want? Our answer is that they want to be important in a very special way: the various vices of pride are all at root the concern to be *self-important*. Self-importance is not the same as importance. We all want to be important to our friends and family, and we all want a little importance in our work: we want to have contributed something. Also, self-importance is not the same as being important to yourself. To the tax collector who beat his breast and said "God have mercy on me a sinner" (Luke 18.9–14), the state of his self was very important; that's why he was so sorry that it was such a mess. Jesus commended him for his self-concern, but condemned the self-righteous Pharisee for his. Self-importance is the idea that people express when they say someone has a "big ego."

What do people who have a big ego want? Typically, they want such things as social status, glory, credit, adulating attention, honor, superiority, special entitlements, prestige, and power. Why do they want these things? They want them because these things make them important. It's possible to want them for other reasons. For example, young academics might want the prestige that comes from publishing in excellent journals because they have a family to feed and the prestige is a way to a higher salary or a job that pays enough to feed the family. Or maybe they want it because it can lead to promotion and more opportunities to do the kind of research they want to do. Here they are seeking prestige not "for its own sake," but for the sake of their family or research activity. But people with the vices of pride want such things because they make them self-important. But what are the marks of self-importance or the big ego?

We think that most adults have an intuitive sense for what conceited, arrogant, and snobbish people care about, so we might just list the vices of pride and then say that self-importance is what people with those traits care about. The conceited person cares about being a big shot, the arrogant person cares about the entitlements that inflate his importance, the vain person cares about the adulation of others because they confer importance on her, the domineering person cares about controlling other people's lives because it makes him feel big. We should

note that the concern for self-importance can manifest itself in failure; we are not saying that the person who cares about self-importance always succeeds in getting the kind of importance that he desires. Wounded vanity, for example, in which the vain person feels small, is still based on a concern for self-importance. And the domineering person who gets angry or feels worthless because others don't truckle to her efforts to control them is concerned for her self-importance.

But let's try to do better at defining self-importance than just to point to the list of vices of pride. It seems to us that the kind of importance that people with the vices of pride care about is *comparative* and *noninstrumental*. These seem to be two general features of self-importance. Exemplars of the vices of pride want to be *more* important than, or at least *as* important as, others, and they want this, not as a means to some other end, such as getting elected to office, creating a well-functioning organization, getting a raise, being an example to others, turning out excellent students, winning a game, or some such possibly worthy goal. Rather, exemplars of the vices of pride want this sort of superiority (or equality) "for its own sake" as we say, which means they want this superiority simply because it makes *them* superior. So self-importance is (usually) socially comparative importance. Consider some of the vices of pride.

In his conceit, the conceited person thinks of himself, not just as important, but as comparatively so. So conceited persons have a tendency to feel contempt, at least mild, for the people to whom they conceive themselves as superior; they look "down" on them. Envy is notoriously comparative, and much of its nastiness is that the envier wishes ill or demotion for the person to whom she feels she's losing the competition for importance. Envy is just the loser's version of invidious pride, the very same competitive concern to be important by being superior to the other. Others don't always cooperate in our quest for personal importance because they're on a similar quest for comparative credit and power in the interest of *their* importance. And so we and they tend to construe them and us as rivals, and we land ourselves in the spirit world of Invidia. We construe our rivals' excellence as our belittlement and their deficiency as our exaltation. In our minds we are elevated by their defeats and defeated by their elevations. When their defeats seem to elevate us, we feel the vicious triumph of invidious pride, and when their successes abase us in our eyes, we feel the vicious defeat of envy. To be invidious, the kind of superiority that the prideful individual prizes has to be noninstrumental. For example, athletes typically want to outdo their competitors, but this concern for superiority need not be invidious, because it can be teleologically subordinate to winning the game, which may be merely playful. Even when it gets "serious," the desire for competitive superiority need not take pleasure in the other's inferiority, nor need be focused in that way, and certainly need not have the character of contempt.

In self-righteousness moral goodness and rectitude can become the material of our self-importance. Self-comparison is at the heart of this vice when we enjoy comparing ourselves with others whom we see as less upright than ourselves (less industrious, less relaxed, less tolerant, less rigorous, less liberal, less conservative, less wise, less pious, less enlightened, less frugal, and so forth) and so enjoy the feeling of our moral superiority. A related aspect of the concept of importance that dominates the vices of pride is *credit*, a preoccupation with getting credit for one's actions and accomplishments. Notice that one can take pleasure in acting and the ability to act well in a variety of ways; this is an aspect of virtuous pride. (Let's call it secure agency. It's a kind of self-confidence as agent or confidence in one's own agency.) But seeking and loving agency differ from seeking and loving credit for one's agency; the concern about credit, especially if it's noninstrumental, is one of the marks of vicious pride. Giving credit, generously or justly, can be a way of recognizing, loving, or respecting another; when the received credit is happily construed as an expression of one of these, it is not vicious. The vice that we call hyperautonomy is the concern to be self-made, not to owe others for what one is and has accomplished, and this concern is obviously linked to the concern for credit. Earlier, we qualified our observation that self-importance is comparative with the word "usually." An example of hyperautonomy that is an exception to this generalization is the case of Lucifer's fall, which some think was the result of wanting to know God in the beatific vision by his own natural powers. He pridefully refused God's grace, which was needed to elevate him so that he could have the beatific vision. He wanted, in this way, to be self-made, but in this case, the vice of hyperautonomy seems to be exemplified without any comparing. Snobbery's basis of relative importance is the exclusive social circle or clique or guild with which we identify—our Ivy League university, our country club, our religious denomination, our membership among the wine cognoscenti, and the like.

In the vice of domination the vicious sense of your personal importance is based on the concern to lord it over others, to dominate them as a way of being important. This may take the form of wanting credit, not only for what we have accomplished, but also for what they have accomplished. But you can dominate others in a variety of ways: by determining what they do, by making them fear you, by being their protector against other things they fear, by controlling their movements, by shaping their minds. (As a prominent theologian is reputed to have commented, "Hale, I don't want to teach 'em to think for themselves; I teach 'em to think like *me!*"). Well-ordered social life requires that some people be in charge of others, and the concern to be in control of others may aim instrumentally at that end, but the vicious attitude involves seeking such control as a way of being personally important. A sense of personal authority, a

confidence in assuming intellectual leadership when that is a way to guide your students toward the truth quite apart from your personal importance, can be regarded as a kind of pride, and it can be virtuous. The ambiguity of the theologian's expression as to whether he is domineering or properly prideful illustrates the difficulty of assessing a subject's humility on the basis of empirically observable behavior.

The fact that the concerns characteristic of the vices of pride all have instrumental counterparts affords scope for self- and other-deception. We can almost always construe our vicious concerns as not vicious because what we really want in wanting them is some worthy good—and sometimes (or usually) our motives are mixed in a way that's hard for even us to sort out. Our domination is for the other's good or the good of the organization, our vanity is really a commitment to excellence in fashion or to pleasing our spouse with our trim neatness, our snobbery is really a commitment to excellence in higher education, and so forth.

Our thesis is that the virtue of humility is simply the intelligent absence of the vices of pride. It consists in *not* being motivated by self-importance. If you are utterly free from envy, domination, snobbery, hyperautonomy, haughtiness, grandiosity, arrogance, vanity, and any other vice of pride, then you are utterly humble. And if you are somewhat, or impressively but not completely, free of these vices, then you are somewhat humble, or quite humble.

Humility, on our account, doesn't have any characteristic motive. In that way it differs from the virtues of justice and compassion, which have the characteristic motives of concern for just states of affairs and the relief of suffering. But obviously, the life of the humble person requires motives, and these motives need to have normal coherence. If a person lacks all the vices of pride, but does so because she is severely enough afflicted with mental deficits not to be able to be concerned with self-importance, or because of some other neurological defect (for example, damage to the prefrontal cortex), then "humility" is not a very good name for her condition. This is why we say that the lack of concern for self-importance needs to be "intelligent" to count as humility. This qualification is a low hurdle. It is perhaps arguable that small children are not capable of either the vices of pride or the corresponding humility. Their lack of the vices of pride might be why Jesus of Nazareth told his disciples that "of such is the kingdom of God." A toddler's lack of the vices of pride has not yet developed into the virtue of humility because the child has not yet made intelligent choices concerning the kind of goods that people consider means to self-importance. Thus the lack of concern for self-importance would make small children *analogous* to people with the virtue of humility, but it would not be sufficient for their actually having the virtue.

Competing Views of Humility

Among the many conceptions of humility that have been proposed in the philosophical literature, we have chosen seven that seem to us to be most widely held. We have drawn examples all the way from the ancient philosophers to a new view that was published in 2013.

Humility as Small-Mindedness

Among the virtues discussed by ancient Greek philosophers, humility is decidedly a minor character. As heirs of the Homeric idealization of strength, courage, and self-assertion, they do not, for the most part, countenance humility as we have described it. It is arguable, however, that Socrates, despite being an updated Achilles (Plato, 1997, *Apology* 28b–d), exemplified a virtue in the neighborhood of humility, and at one point in Plato's *Laws*, Plato's apparent mouthpiece, the Athenian, declares that steadiness in the pursuit of justice requires that in obedience to God justice be followed "with meekness and humility" (Plato, 1997, *Laws* 4.716a–b; see Pinsent, 2012, p. 248–50).

But Aristotle, more faithful, it seems, to the Homeric ideal, tells us that pride (magnanimity or great-souledness), which is "a sort of crown of the virtues" (1998, §4.3), makes people sufficiently attentive to the honors that are due them for their greatness that they utterly despise "honor from casual people and on trifling grounds." This strong awareness of the honor that is due them, along with its evaluation in light of their own excellence, smacks pungently of a concern for self-importance (for example, as conceit). People who construe themselves as less worthy of honor than they in fact deserve are pusillanimous (small-minded, the contrary of magnanimous or proud). By contrast with the Greek philosophers, the Bible and the subsequent Christian tradition are chock full of commendations of humility as a virtue.

Socrates (Plato, 1997, *Apology*) and the passage from *Laws* both stress subordination to God (obedience) as a fruit of what we call humility. They don't attempt to define it or elaborate the concept, but we can see how our account of it as a lack of concern for self-importance would support what they do say. Aristotle's great-souled person seems strongly oriented by the concern for self-sufficiency, or what we call the vice of hyperautonomy, and behind that is the concern for his own personal importance, his greatness. Socrates, by contrast, is consumed by his search for integrity and truth, in indifference to honor as well as other "external" goods (safety, money). He depicts himself, indeed, as not an "authority" on anything, but instead as a "midwife" (a kind of servant) who helps other people give birth to ideas (Plato, 1997, *Theaetetus*). He seems to be a prime exemplar of humility as lack of concern for self-importance, though

he has very high aspirations to understand reality and to be a person of integrity (species of virtuous pride, in our vocabulary).

Humility as a Brake on Irrational Ambition

Thomas Aquinas says that for aspirations that are difficult to achieve, we need a virtue “to temper and restrain the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately; and this belongs to the virtue of humility” (1981, 2a2æ, Q161, art.1, *responsio*). “Humility restrains the appetite (*reprimat appetitum*) from aiming at great things against right reason” (*ibid.*, reply 3). “. . . it belongs properly to humility, that a man restrain himself (*aliquis reprimat seipsum*) from being borne towards that which is above him” (*ibid.*, art.2, *responsio*). Aquinas’s idea is that we have an appetite for *good* things that are *difficult* to attain. Such an appetite can go wrong in two ways, by discouragement because of the difficulty, or by overexuberance in seeking things that are beyond what is proper for it. So to be properly disposed, the appetite needs two virtues, one to encourage it (thus magnanimity) and one to restrain it from going overboard (humility).

For Aquinas and the Aristotelian tradition, temperance is the virtue that moderates “appetites”—desires, urges, concerns—in accordance with right reason. The basic or cardinal virtue of temperance moderates appetites for food, drink, and sex; that is, it makes them stay within their proper bounds, where “proper” means rational or reasonable for human beings (or for an individual human being). But we also have other “appetites” that can get out of bounds, and one of these is our aspiration to great things like being president of the United States, or a gourmet cook, or full professor, or billionaire oil tycoon. “Appetite” for such things is the kind of appetite that humility governs, according to Aquinas. These pursuits have conditions of rationality having to do with individual talents and other characteristics, moral constraints, constraints imposed by unavoidable social circumstances, and so forth. Humility is the disposition, in the appetite for great things, to stay within the bounds of those conditions. Humility is a limiting mechanism, like a governor on a gasoline engine that prevents it from being revved up beyond safety standards for the particular kind of engine it is.

It seems to us that a person might pursue an aspiration that was beyond her capacities or reasonable opportunities out of ignorance of those limits, and thus do so in a way that is not unhumble. When we’re young, we’re often lacking in understanding of our own talents and will not find out whether we’re talented enough for greatness in a certain pursuit unless we actually try to attain it. If we shoot for the stars without proper regard for our personal limitations, that doesn’t necessarily come from lack of humility. And even if we continue to

pursue them “irrationally” after seeing the writing on the wall in mid-life, that irrationality is still not necessarily unhumility. In our view, the motivation is what makes the difference. Even if we stay prudently within our limits in pursuing greatness, if we do so out of a concern for self-importance (rather than, say, musical excellence, intellectual understanding, or political service to our country), *then* we are lacking in humility. Humility might *help* us stay rationally within our limits inasmuch as it eliminates one possible motive for going beyond them (namely, the concern for self-importance); *that* is how it is related to staying within limits in the pursuit of greatness.

Is humility a kind of self-control or self-regulation? In the quotations that open our discussion of Aquinas, he speaks in two different ways about how humility “restrains” appetite. He says that *humility* restrains the appetite, and he says that the humble person restrains *himself* (meaning, we suppose, that he restrains his appetite). But temperance differs from self-control inasmuch as the temperate person doesn’t need to control himself, because temperance is a matter of having a right appetite in the first place. On the view that we’re advocating, humility is not a form of self-control, because it is the lack of the appetite for self-importance. A fully humble person doesn’t have a desire for self-importance that needs to be restrained. Of course, very few, if any, of us are fully humble, so we do need to restrain our appetite for self-importance, trying not to be conceited, snobbish, arrogant, vain, hyperautonomous, and the like. But that’s because we’re not humble.

Humility as Chronic Shame or Low Self-Esteem

David Hume treats “humility” in Book II of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, “Of the Passions” (Hume, 1888, pp. 277–290). So he conceives it as a passion, or what contemporary English speakers would call an emotion. To us it seems a bit odd to think of humility as an emotion, though we do speak of feeling humiliated or humbled. But neither of these is the trait that we call humility. In fact, you will be less vulnerable to humiliation if you are humble. Being vain, arrogant, snobbish, and hyperautonomous sets you up for humiliation because you care so much about your self-importance that persons and circumstances can easily bruise it (think of “wounded vanity”). Hume’s example of pride—which he also treats as an emotion—is feeling good about yourself because you have a beautiful house. So an example of humility in his sense of the word would be feeling bad about yourself because you live in a slum. Insofar as it’s an emotion—a feeling that occurs at a given moment, say, in reflecting on the place you’re living in contrasted to where the nice people live—we would call this shame, not humility. And insofar as such shame becomes a chronic disposition to think and feel and act and see the world in certain terms, we might call it low self-esteem. The

Oxford English Dictionary, in its first definition, says that humility is “the quality of being humble or having a lowly opinion of oneself,” and Norvin Richards (1992) regards this as the “usual” way of conceiving humility. Even this seems odd to us, *Oxford* and Richards notwithstanding. Perhaps some people speak English this way, in which case sometimes the word “humility” is used to designate a vice or at least an emotional defect. But it’s not what we would call the virtue of humility.

We have to admit, though, that the Christian tradition has sometimes seemed to mistake low self-esteem for the virtue of humility. Jonathan Edwards says that

love to God tends to humility, which is one main root of a meek and long-suffering spirit. Love to God, as it exalts him, tends to low thoughts and estimates of ourselves, and leads to a deep sense of our unworthiness and our desert of ill, because he that loves God is sensible of the hatefulness and vileness of sin committed against the Being that he loves. And discerning an abundance of this in himself, he abhors himself in his own eyes, as unworthy of any good, and deserving of all evil.

(Edwards, 1969, Sermon 4)

This may be what we call a humbling experience. But humility as lack of concern for self-importance does not imply that the humble person will have a low view of himself; but it does imply that he will lack a major *barrier* (his love of self-importance) to noticing and admitting shameful things about himself. We note, too, that the Christian tradition often elides the virtue of contrition (sadness about one’s sins and sinfulness) with humility. It’s wrong, from a Christian point of view, to think humility implies contrition, because Jesus Christ is sinless and yet he is the prime exemplar of humility in the New Testament.

Related to, or perhaps an aspect of, the low self-assessment view of humility is the low ambition view. Tara Smith expresses it this way:

Typically, the humble person does not want very much. She is content with a minimal standard of living, or job, or romance, and satisfies herself with relatively low-level needs and aims.

(Smith, 1998, p. 78)

Here humility is taken to be or imply a kind of lethargy, passivity, or maybe hopelessness—certainly a deficiency of aspiration. If we think that a mark of an excellent, well-formed agent is energy and initiative and a sense of high calling, then a person like this is certainly defective as a human specimen. We agree with Pinsent (2012, p. 247), who says that “humility [the virtue] is not incompatible with greatness of leadership, action, and achievement.”

Humility as Dogmatic Ignorance of One's Excellence

Some years ago Julia Driver (1989) stirred up some lively discussion among philosophers by claiming that the person with the virtue of modesty will insist, against all evidence, on his lack of excellences. Modesty is “a dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth” (1989, p. 378; see also Driver, 2000, chapter 2, section 1). Modesty is, thus, one of the “virtues of ignorance.” It is not just *ignoring* your excellences, but actually *being ignorant* of them and refusing to listen to reason if somebody thinks you’re virtuous. If you come to think maybe you are modest or kind, immediately you lose your modesty. The “modesty” she’s trying to describe seems to be just as well called humility; it has to do, not with covering up your more private body parts, but with not bragging, not noticing ways you are superior to others, and not insisting on getting credit for what you’ve done.

In our view, the humble person is perfectly capable of acknowledging and assessing her excellence. If she’s a concert violinist she may know quite exactly who is better than she and who is inferior among her colleagues. There is no reason grounded in humility that she should not know this. She will probably not be preoccupied with these rankings, and will certainly not be preoccupied with them because of a concern for her status in the community of musicians (unless that status has instrumental significance for something she wants—say, a fellowship to study with an outstanding teacher). The reason for her lack of concern with the rankings will, if she is humble, be due to her lack of concern for self-importance. She is ultimately interested, not in being an important “figure” in the music world, but in being a good musician. Any interest she has in being an important “figure” is because it somehow enables her to make the music she loves or serves some other end that she wants.

Humility as Nonoverestimation in Self-Evaluation

In an effort to avoid the rather obvious infelicities of the shame/low self-esteem and ignorance views, several philosophers proposed that humility (modesty) is a disposition not to exaggerate your own worth or excellence. “According to the non-overestimation account, the modest person may well have a perfectly accurate sense of her accomplishments and worth but she does not overestimate them” (Flanagan, 1990; see also Ben Ze’ev, 1993). Richards (1992) thinks that to have the virtue of humility is to understand yourself so well that you have no inclination to exaggerate your self-worth.

Humility dispels self-overestimation that is motivated, as it often is, by a concern for self-importance, but we don’t think nonoverestimation in self-evaluation is sufficient for humility, because it is compatible with some of the vices of pride. The musician who envies those whose status in the music

community is higher than her own may well judge accurately her own musical value relative to theirs; but she lacks humility because the kind of importance she wishes for in being equal to or better than the other musicians is self-importance. Accurate self-evaluation is also compatible with snobbery and invidious pride: our musician accurately ranks herself vis-à-vis the other musicians, but she feels snobbishly pleasant contempt for, or invidious pride toward, those who rank below her. If her musical skills are fairly high, she might be vain about them without overestimating them.

Humility as Owning One's Limitations

A view of humility that is similar to non-self-overestimation, perhaps a subspecies of that account, is the owning-one's-limitations account. Nancy Snow (1995, p. 210) defines humility as “the disposition to allow the awareness of and concern about your limitations to have a realistic influence on your attitudes and behavior.” Jeanine Grenberg (2005, p. 7) comments that humility is “a virtue that is meant to bring us to terms with our limits,” and Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (2015) have proposed that intellectual humility is owning one's intellectual limitations. The expressions “realistic influence,” “bring us to terms with,” and “own” all suggest that the recognition of your limits that is required for humility is something more than mere notional acknowledgment or belief. You need to have accepted, internalized, and come to terms with those limitations in a deeper way. If, for example, you see your limitations clearly but feel deeply humiliated and resentful on their account, your reaction to them shows that you are not humble about them. Or you might own your intellectual limitations because you want to wow everybody at philosophy conferences, or because you enjoy lording it over others intellectually, and you realize that taking your weaknesses very seriously is crucial to realizing such ends. No doubt humility is a disposition to own your limitations, but for that disposition to be *humility*, it has to be the right *kind* of disposition. Perhaps that “kind” is that you *not* react to the clear presentation of your limitations with any action or emotion based in a concern for self-importance. In that case, the lack of that concern would be basic to proper “ownership” of your limitations; it would be one of the explanations of why you are so willing to admit them—as well as of all the other happy consequences of being humble. It seems arbitrary to pick ownership of limitations out from the many good consequences of humility and to say that that is what humility *is*.

Humility as Inattention to One's Excellences

Nicolas Bommarito (2013) writes about the virtue of modesty, but says he takes the terms “modesty” and “humility” to be interchangeable (p. 93, footnote 1).

We think that the concept he is explaining plausibly fits in a discussion of humility and will treat his account as about humility. Humility, then, “is rooted in certain patterns of attention” (p. 93). This view is not nearly as widely held by philosophers as the non–self-overestimation and limitations-owning views, and of all the accounts we have surveyed it is the closest to the one we advocate. Bommarito’s proposal is that what is most fundamental about humility is not that the humble person makes a certain self-evaluation, whether low, unexaggerated, or accurate, nor that he is ignorant of his excellences. Humility is compatible with knowing about your own excellences, but also compatible with being mistaken about them by either overestimation or underestimation. In that, he agrees with the view we advocate, namely that humility is a lack of interest in your self-importance. But he doesn’t quite agree with us. He thinks, instead, that humility (or as he calls it, modesty) is a disposition not to *pay attention* to your excellences. It is “a virtue of attention,” namely *inattention*—to your own excellences. Contrastingly, we might say that our view is that humility is “a virtue of concern,” namely *unconcern*—about your self-importance.

In our view, it is probably true that the humble person, on the average, pays less attention to the fact that he’s Ivy League than the snob, less attention to his meritorious special entitlements than the arrogant, less attention to important people’s admiration of himself than the vain, less attention to his achieved agency than the hyperautonomous, less attention to his power over others than the domineering, and less attention to his merits than the conceited. But the not paying of attention is a secondary, consequential feature of humility, not the one that makes humility *humility*. What makes these various kinds of attention express the vices of pride is, in our view, the fact that they express the subject’s concern for the various kinds of self-importance or inflation of “ego,” and what makes their absence characteristic of humility is the subject’s lack of interest in self-importance and ego puffing. Each of the kinds of attention that we just listed is compatible with humility if motivated by something other than ego inflation. For some purposes or other, the humble person may pay attention to his Ivy League background, his power over others, and so forth. Actually, Bommarito makes our point himself, saying that the pattern of attention

is not sufficient for modesty; it must happen for the *right reasons*. Those who are inattentive to their good qualities only because an attention disorder prevents them from attending to anything for very long or because they are the kind of pessimists who never attend to any good qualities at all are not modest.

(2013, p. 103, italics added)

Our attention is drawn to what we care about; our concerns give us reasons for attending and determining the specific character of our acts of attention. And yet Bommarito's overall argument is that a pattern of attention is the essential mark of modesty/humility. We think that his conclusion should be that humility is a virtue of (un)concern.

Conclusion

In our view, of the concepts that surround and constitute that of humility, the one most in need of further philosophical (conceptual) clarification is that of self-importance. Currently our understanding of this concept is largely intuitive, being presented by way of the rich English vocabulary for the vices of pride (arrogance, vanity, conceit, grandiosity, narcissism, and so forth) and by such popular expressions as self-importance, big ego, puffed up, stroking one's ego, and selective abusive uses of the word pride. On the account that we have given in this chapter, the concept of self-importance will need to be approached by way of careful conceptual analyses of the more specific vices of pride, of which the virtue of humility is the absence. A more rigorous account of self-importance will advance our understanding of humility, and therewith the precision of empirical studies.

The more general point of which the above is an instance is that empirical investigations of character traits and other psychological features of human beings depend crucially on adequate conceptualization of the object of investigation. If an empirical researcher lacks a clear and plausible conception of humility or bases his empirical work on too simple an operationalization of the construct, for example, we cannot expect very much in the way of reliable information from that researcher's investigations. Empirical research on constructs such as humility is therefore deeply dependent for its fruitfulness on prior philosophical work, whether that be done by a professional philosopher or by a philosophically sophisticated psychologist. This chapter suggests that conceptual work on humility is difficult and highly contested among experts. Given the dependence of empirical investigations on conceptual work, it seems likely that that contest will be characteristic of empirical investigations for the foreseeable future as well.

Humility, to the extent that it can be actually achieved, has good consequences both in the life of its possessors and in the lives of their families, colleagues, and even acquaintances. It improves friendships, child rearing, and the culture of workplaces. It improves a person's self-understanding and, more broadly, intellectual functioning (Roberts & Wood, 2007). It reduces unhappiness and, we speculate, many of the psychological problems that drive people to therapists. It is, therefore, a very "practical" virtue. A practical implication of humility's

practicality is that it is incumbent on psychologists and educators to devise and test interventions that will reduce people's concern for self-importance. For some practical proposals suggested by the conception of humility proposed in this chapter, see Roberts (2016).¹

Note

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