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# 3

## HUMILITY IS NOT A VIRTUE

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### 3.1 Introduction

There are a few concepts of folk psychology which have confounded us so much over the centuries that they have undergone significant evolutions of meaning and application.<sup>1</sup> Which of shame and guilt is public and which is private? “Sympathy” had different meanings for Hume and Smith. *Dignity* was once only for the noble classes, but when egalitarianism emerged in the Enlightenment, it was found that everyone had it (Waldron, 2012). More radically, “condescension” has gone through an inversion of meaning, as it was first a virtue implying, in Samuel Johnson’s words, “a voluntary submission to equality with inferiors”, but has since turned into a negative trait implying contempt for those “beneath” one (Appiah, 2018).<sup>2</sup> “Humility” is also a word with roots involving socio-economic class, and it has undergone a similar inversion of meaning, though in the opposite direction: humility has changed from being thought of as a negative trait to being a virtue. In the West, humility began to be commonly thought of as a virtue at the start of the Common Era, and it has been commonplace to think of it in that way since. Augustine even hailed humility as “the foundation of all the other virtues”.

Consider, however, that while it may have been just and wise for a leader of a long-oppressed people, as Jesus was, to preach humility as a virtue to everyone who would listen (especially Romans), this does not imply that it is always equally just and wise to preach humility as virtue. It is, for example, insidiously pernicious and evil for oppressors to preach humility as a virtue to those whom they oppress: “Work sets you free”, it said over the gate at Auschwitz. Or, as Frederick Douglass notes:

I have met, at the south, many good, religious colored people who were under the delusion that God required them to submit to slavery and to wear their chains with meekness and humility. I could entertain no such nonsense as this.

*(1892, p. 105)*

Humility can be a tool of moral improvement, but it can also be an instrument of subjugation, a means of social control to maintain an unjust status quo. Humility is always politically conservative. Rebellion, however well-justified, is almost impossible in a climate too rich in humility. Feeling humility is related to feeling humiliation, a horrible feeling with which oppressed

people are all too familiar. Humility is indeed the overriding characteristic of the servile: they willingly accept less than their fair share, habitually defer to others, and fail to stand up for themselves. This is the worst case, but there are more frequently times when it is wrong to show humility, wrong to be deferential. Speaking truth to power, or engaging in civil disobedience more generally, should be done respectfully, but people who have the clear moral high ground have no need of moral humility, at least on that point. When speaking truth to power, one ought to look power in the eye. When Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) responded to white, moderate clergymen by saying, “I cannot sit idly by ...” and “Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere”, he did so without humility, but rather as a clarion call and with well-founded rectitude. It is hard to see humility in a thoroughly positive light given how morally inappropriate it can be. Morality does not defer to power. Were it not so, Yogi Berra couldn’t have quipped, “It ain’t the heat, it’s the humility”. Humility is often far from what is noble and fine (*to kalon*) and because it can lead us morally astray, it is wrong to think of it as a virtue.

It is cliché to point out that power corrupts and success breeds contempt. Nevertheless, this is true, and humility is needed to bring the powerful and successful back to earth, to remind people that we all began as helpless babies, that we are never more nor less than human, all too human. Compared to what is possible, we are all highly fallible, puny creatures. Almost certainly, there is too little humility in the world and everyone would be better off if there were a great deal more of it. Importantly: *arguing that humility is not a virtue is not to argue that it has no moral value or that it is always bad or a vice*. On the contrary, even among peers, humility is often of great value: it is the pin in the balloon of our egos, the deflation of our pomposity. And, in fact, many of us are in far greater need of it than we like to think or hope. But despite this paean, and however much humility may be in short supply, we ought to follow Bishop Butler’s advice and see it for what it is and not another thing (1900, p. 18).

In pursuit of the thesis that humility is not a virtue, what follows is a negative program and a positive one. The negative will explain why humility is not a virtue, while the positive thesis defends an alternative account of the trait, set within a broader virtue theory, wherein *humility* naturally does the same sort of work as *continence*, which is not a virtue in the classical tradition. Thus: as continence is to incontinence, humility is to arrogance. And as temperance is the virtue toward which continence is merely an intermediary step, justice is the virtue toward which humility leads the arrogant. On this view, humility is “a corrective”, something to be prescribed only to those who have already moved away from the virtue of justice and are already engaged in arrogance to one degree or another.<sup>3</sup>

### **3.2 Why humility is not a virtue**

As noted at the outset, the history of humility is complicated. The word for it was originally derogatory and implied submissiveness and lack of self-reliance. “Humilitas” in Latin translates from the Greek *ταπεινός*, “tapeinos”, which means “groveling” or “lowly”; its antonym, “kalon”, was “nobility”. Humility was the just and appropriate attitude to adopt for those who are “inferior” when faced with their “betters”. So, at first blush, we may say that humility is originally understood as a character trait, with attending feelings or a particular phenomenology, which inhibits assertive behavior and yields deference: the humble defer to the noble.<sup>4</sup> It therefore had only negative connotations. And while presented in the Old Testament as the correct attitude to have toward God, who is infinitely our superior, it was not seen as a virtue to be humble before other people or nations. (Indeed, the Jewish dogma of being “the chosen people” is far from humility.) This negative view of having “humble origins” changed most dramatically when Jesus exalted the lowly in his Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall find consolation.

Blessed are the gentle [the humble, the meek], they shall have the earth for their possession ...

You have heard that they were told, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' But what I tell you is this: Do not resist those who wrong you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other also ... If someone in authority presses you into service for one mile, go with him two.

(1989, *Matthew*, 5: 5, 38–41)

However reassuring this may be to the hopelessly powerless, it is striking how it contravenes ordinary notions of social justice: *do not resist those who wrong you?* (What would Jesus have said about the ancient [even in his day] slavery of Jews in Egypt? Should the Jews have built an extra pyramid? Was Moses wrong to resist?) In any case, faith in divine justice inverted the moral status of *humility*, and what was once derogatory, i.e., accepting one's inferior place, became laudatory. Humility became good because God will make it right in the end.

If God exists, then justice rightly demands humility before God. As Kant says, "We have reason to harbour a low opinion of our person ... For if we compare ourselves with the holy moral law, we discover how remote we are from congruity with it" (1997, p. 129 [27:348f]).<sup>5</sup> This seems all the more true if one accepts the doctrine of Original Sin. But leaving God and Original Sin out of the picture, what would "humility" mean if we stripped away its theistic crust? Is there anything virtuous left? We no longer need to feel humility all the time because we are originally sinful or because we are always under the watchful eye of God. Were there inherently superior beings amongst us, it would be right and just to feel humility in front of them, but among fellow human beings, no such superior people exist. Whatever rightly inspires awe in nature, rightly leaves us feeling humility.<sup>6</sup> But there is nothing like this in the social or interpersonal realm. From the Enlightenment on, theists and atheists alike have wanted to justify a moral and egalitarian attitude to be shared by all human beings, and this implies a baseline equality among us, a "least common denominator". Orthogonal to theism, in contemporary times justice, human rights and the inherent dignity of humanity are founded upon the idea that we are all, fundamentally, equally deserving of respect and that no one is inherently superior to anyone else.

Since the early modern period, there have been a few critiques of humility's status as a virtue. Hume (1975) famously dismisses humility as one of the "monkish virtues", along with celibacy and mortification, among others, while Nietzsche (1989) made it a feature of "slave morality". A reasonable (though flatfooted) reading of Sidgwick (1907), taken up by Anscombe (1958), has him doubting that humility is a virtue because it requires people to underrate themselves. (James Wardle [1983] later disputes this reading of Sidgwick.) However, a more subtle, incisive, and telling critique comes from Mary Wollstonecraft, from a chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1995) entitled, "Modesty. – Comprehensively Considered, and Not as a Sexual Virtue", where she writes,

[I]n defining modesty, it appears to me equally proper to discriminate that purity of mind, which is the effect of chastity, from a simplicity of character that leads us to form a just opinion of ourselves, equally distant from vanity or presumption, though by no means incompatible with a lofty consciousness of our own dignity. Modesty, in the latter signification of the term, is, that soberness of mind which teaches a man not to

think more highly of himself than he ought to think, and should be distinguished from humility, because humility is a kind of self-abasement.

(p. 207)

We have already noted how the idea of having “a just opinion of ourselves” is best captured by the virtue of justice, more so, quite arguably, than modesty (or humility). Importantly, however, Wollstonecraft’s understanding of humility has been taken up by contemporary usage, regardless of how it is considered by philosophers and theologians. The *Oxford English Dictionary* first defines it as “The quality of being humble or having a lowly opinion of oneself”, and secondly defines it in terms of “self-abasement”. If we follow common usage, humility is certainly not a virtue.

Turning now to contemporary accounts of *humility*, there is much to be learned from them. Most of this literature is on intellectual humility, but there seems little reason to think that there should be any significant differences between intellectual and moral humility. The currently dominant view appears to have first been voiced by Norvin Richards (1988), who argues that humility is having a proper perspective on oneself. Nancy Snow (1995, p. 210) defines it as “the disposition to allow the awareness of and concern about [one’s] limitations to have a realistic influence on [one’s] attitudes and behavior”. Allan Hazlett’s (2017) view is that intellectual humility is excellence in attributing to oneself ignorance and other intellectual flaws, failings, or limitations, while Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (2015) jointly defend the claim that intellectual humility is the virtue of owning one’s intellectual limitations. Presumably, moral humility is the generalization of the trait just described: the idea of knowing one’s limitations, and having this knowledge affect judgment and action. For ease of reference, this view will be referred to as the “OL” view, for “owning limitations”.

The start of a critique of the OL view begins with a purely analytic point: the greatest worry about the OL view is that it seems to describe half a trait while ignoring the other half. And as soon as we put both halves together, we end up with something that cannot be considered *humility* any longer. The problem is that accurately knowing one’s limitations also entails accurately knowing one’s strengths and competences. Analytically, there is not one without the other. It certainly does not seem virtuous to own one’s limitations and yet fail at owning one’s strengths. If the glass is half empty, it is apt to acknowledge the emptiness, but it makes no sense to do so without acknowledging the half which is full. We cannot know what we do not do well without being able to distinguish this from what we can do well. But if we put both parts of this self-knowledge together, we no longer have humility. “Trust me, I’m good at this” does not sound very humble. What is the virtue which informs us with an accurate picture of ourselves, including our limitations and our strengths, our weaknesses and our competences? Again, it is not humility but justice.

Try replacing the word “humility” with “justice” in the formulations of the OL view, and one ends up with a smooth and natural read. To take a few examples, first, here is a sentence of Richards with “justice” substituted for “humility”: “Justice doesn’t require that you take no pride at all in what you’ve done, but only that you take less pride than a far greater accomplishment” (1988, p. 255). Next, here are three sentences of Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder, which are meant to show the plausibility of the OL view, substituting “justice” for “intellectual humility”: “Justice increases a person’s propensity to admit his intellectual limitations to himself and others”; “Justice reduces a person’s propensity to blame and explain-away when confronting her own intellectual shortcomings”; and “Justice increases a person’s propensity to defer to others who don’t have her intellectual limitations, in situations that call upon those limitations”

(2015, pp. 13–14.) In the following section, more reasons will be given for thinking that these theorists have mistaken justice for humility.

Here, however, is a *reductio ad absurdum* for the view that humility is a virtue. Following tradition, as well as Martha Nussbaum (1988) and Christine Swanton (2003), let us assume that each virtue has a particular “range” or “field of action” in which it operates. So, for example, courage ranges over all dangerous situations and the courageous thing to do in any dangerous situation is the correct thing to do. Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that humility is a virtue and that the OL view of it is correct. Humility therefore ranges over all situations in which owning one’s limitations becomes salient, such that the correct thing to do is to act humbly.<sup>7</sup> Now, consider “Tank Man”, the unidentified man who stood, with food bags in hand, in front of Chinese tanks in Tiananmen Square on 5 June 1989. Let’s assume that the Chinese government intended to instill humility and obedience in the protesters by sending tanks to confront them. Let’s also assume that Tank Man already possessed the virtue of humility: he is well-aware of his limitations and weaknesses, he defers when apt, tempers his beliefs, etc.

Now, Tank Man finds himself in a situation in which he is (for whatever reason) uniquely well-placed to play a role in the demonstrations by walking in front of the tanks. Tank Man has no reason to think he can stop the tanks which could crush him, but thinks something like the following, “Despite my frailty in the face of this overwhelming force [acknowledging his limitations], still, the right thing to do now is speak truth to power”. Let’s assume that this was the morally correct and virtuous thing to do. And yet, whatever else was true of his action, there is simply no way to consider Tank Man’s stepping in front of the tanks as an action motivated by humility.<sup>8</sup> It might be heroic, it might be reckless, it might be just or even arrogant, but it surely was not humble. Given all this, consider the following argument:

1. Humility is the virtue which ranges over all circumstances involving the owning of one’s limitations. (Call these “L-situations”.)
2. So, in any L-situation, the humble thing to do is the right thing to do.
3. When Chinese tanks confronted the protesters, it was an L-situation for the protesters.
4. The right to do in this L-situation was to block the tanks with one’s body.
5. Blocking the path of a tank with only one’s body is not being humble.
6. So, when tanks were in Tiananmen Square, the humble thing for Tank Man to have done was to not be humble (from 2 and 5). (*Reductio*).

The argument gains its purchase because there are times when it is actually wrong to act with genuine humility, even in circumstances which involve owning one’s limitations.<sup>9</sup> Notice that structurally analogous arguments cannot be constructed for, e.g., courage or justice, as there are never situations that fall within the range of these virtues in which one ought not to be courageous or just. Virtues are supposed to always yield correct action: if they did not give this normative assurance, we would have no reason to be investigating them. Situations in which it is morally correct and virtuous to speak truth to power, such as the one Tank Man found himself within, are those in which people ought *not* to act with humility. Acting with humility in such situations is a manifestation of having “too much humility”. If we accept that humility can sometimes be a virtue and sometimes not be a virtue, then we cannot rely on it for normative guidance in any particular situation: some other trait or value, besides humility, must inform us as to when humility is morally correct and when it is not. If having humility is not always the right way to be in situations in which we must own our limitations, then it is not humility itself which makes acting with humility sometimes be the virtuous action. Even if we want to say that only “appropriate humility” is virtuous, it is still not humility *per se* which determines when

it is apt, and we need some other criteria to help us determine what to do, such as relying on positive outcomes. But a move such as this amounts to consequentialism and, in effect, we are no longer treating virtue ethics as its own normative theory.

Would space permit, there are other arguments that question the status of humility as a virtue. One argument concerns the acquisition of virtue and focuses on the differences in how humility is learned compared with other virtues: the basis of humility is found in making mistakes and failing, as opposed to, e.g., how learning to be courageous is modeled on learning carpentry (Aristotle, 2000, 1103a30–b2). Another argument looks into the oftentimes unpleasant phenomenology of humility, its relationship with humiliation, and how uncharacteristic such unpleasantness is for virtue. Unfortunately, space does not permit, so this concludes the negative program for why humility is not a virtue.

### 3.3 Humility as a corrective

Once we secularize the justification of morality, then as long as you and I socially engage with each other as free and mutually respecting equals, humility will only become desirable when our equality is breached by one of us taking an inappropriately superior attitude toward another. Humility ought to then step in and check the problem, like a palliative antidote to a social poison. Friends, real friends, like Aristotle's "virtue friends" (2000, book 8), have no use for humility in front of each other, because such friends are necessarily equals. The lesson, abstracted from this context, is that we ought not to feel humility in front of people whom we see as being no better than us. Or, to put this same point the other way around, whenever people treat each other with mutual respect and good will, when people are fair, moral, and just to each other, humility is otiose.

So, when everyone is respecting each other's equality, humility is not just superfluous but actually inappropriate. Nevertheless, we should expect any viable theory of humility to be able to explain all the praise it has received from saints and philosophers over the centuries, and this is easy to account for. For it is common to find people being inappropriately partial to themselves and/or to those they love and, given free rein (say by a ring of invisibility), most people are generally ready to arrogate as much as they can from life.<sup>10</sup> In Greek, this is the all-too-common vice of *pleonexia*, often translated as "greed". It is the trait associated with arrogation, or taking more than one's fair share, and contrasted to the virtue of justice, or *dikaosunē*. Now, if arrogance were a necessary feature of human psychology, humility would then be needed by everyone, which (for reasons to be discussed below) would count in favor of it being a virtue. (Compare this with the way that everyone feels fear and to that degree everyone requires courage.) But, like all vices, arrogance is only contingent among humans (Aristotle, 2000, 1103a24–5). Nevertheless, those who become arrogant are morally in need of a corrective, a counter-balance, something which brings them back to a fair and just standing with everyone else. Secularized humility serves the important psychological purpose of keeping arrogance in check. This is not, however, sufficient to make it a virtue (also to be discussed below).<sup>11</sup>

One might worry that, if humility is not a virtue, any alternative account of it must be ad hoc, but this is not the case. Virtue theory already has a structure carved out into which humility naturally fits. This is to appeal to unnoticed analogies obtaining between humility and continence. But in traditional virtue theory, continence is not thought of as a virtue (Aristotle, 2000, 1145a15–17).<sup>12</sup> The category of trait into which continence fits was not given a name by Aristotle, but as noted above, since it is supposed to correct for incontinence, we can call it a "corrective" (see Notes 3 and 6 above). One might wonder why continence does not count as a virtue, and the answer is that, in the field of action in which continence and incontinence

arises, temperance is the virtue. Continence is not an excellence, but rather more like a stop-gap measure to overcome incontinence. Incontinence is one form of intemperance, where the other is wanton self-indulgence. Incontinence is when temptation becomes too great to resist and our desires (including appetites and passions) gain mastery over us: we do what we know we ought not to do. Incontinent people are compelled by desire for what tempts them to yield to it, regardless of how misguided, inappropriate, or excessive the desire may be. Temperance is the virtue of not being tempted by what one ought not to be tempted by: temperate people distinguish good pleasures from bad ones and are not even tempted by the bad. Thus, insofar as people are temperate, they have no need of continence and are free to indulge their desires because their desires are always appropriate.<sup>13</sup>

Continence is employed by those who are wont to be incontinent, as a means of resisting inappropriate temptations and doing the right thing when it is difficult to do so. It is needed when a person is not “of one mind” about some X but rather both wants X and wants to not want X. Practiced to excess, continence itself can become the vice of rigid abstinence, dour bitterness, or even self-flagellating asceticism. Despite the possibility of this vice, continence can certainly be aligned with virtue if it is directed at only inappropriate desires, since continent people do what temperate people do, but they do so while fighting with themselves about it instead of acting whole-heartedly or with integrity. So, continence is not an excellent state in which to be; rather, the excellent state is the well-tempered one in which a person is “of one mind” and therefore does not need continence at all. Continence can be seen as a stepping-stone on the way to temperance: those who are not already virtuous need continence, and it is one of the ways by which we learn to be temperate. None of this should be news to people interested in virtue ethics.

What has not been noticed is the way in which an analysis of *humility* may be modeled on *continence*; notice how both involve apt self-restraint. If we understand continence as the psychological trait by which we restrain or correct for incontinence, humility is the psychological trait by which we restrain or correct for arrogance. Both are important for some people to have, while others have little or no need of them.

A Kantian picture of arrogant people suffices: those who are arrogant fail to give others the respect they are due. It may seem as if arrogant people have too much self-respect, more than is due, given how they treat others. But on Kant’s account of arrogance, arrogant people do not have an excess of self-respect, but rather a deceptive way of fooling themselves into thinking that they have self-respect, when in fact they do not.<sup>14</sup> Kant writes:

Arrogance [*Hochmut*] (*superbia* and, as the word expresses it, the inclination to always be *on top*) is a kind of ambition [*Ehrbegierde*] (*ambitio*) in which we demand that others think little of themselves in comparison with us ... arrogance demands from others a respect it denies them.

(1996, p. 581)

And he certainly does not underestimate the perniciousness of arrogance, calling it in one place a “source of all evil” (1998, pp. 66–7). So, arrogance occurs when we self-righteously demand more respect than we are due or when we think of ourselves as somehow deserving more respect than others.

Yet, if arrogance is a vice which is corrected for by humility, what is the virtue which manifests the appropriate and moral attitude of the self toward the self? What plays the role of temperance in the analogy of humility to continence? The answer, as indicated above, is *justice* when understood as a personal virtue, as opposed to a political or institutional virtue. The



quick argument for giving justice this role goes as follows.<sup>15</sup> Justice is the virtue by which we make fair judgments about how much respect to accord to others, especially as compared to the (self-) respect one accords oneself. All injustice which involves a victim involves disrespect for that victim; for if the victim were adequately respected, the perpetrator would refrain from the injustice. And arrogance, the cause of much injustice, is also understood in terms of not giving others adequate respect. On the other side, when people have over-developed the trait of humility and have become servile, they disrespect themselves in a way that is also inconsistent with justice: they are unfair to themselves. So, arrogance and servility are those traits by which we accord to others either too little or too much respect, and justice is the virtue by which we make fair and just assessments of how much respect to accord to ourselves and others. This is backed up by Aristotle's gloss on the virtue, "justice is a mean between committing injustice and suffering it, since the one is having more than one's share, while the other is having less" (2000, 1133b30).

Justice requires that we treat like cases alike, and so we ought to judge ourselves based on the same standards by which we judge others, and so justice is also the virtue by which we make fair and just assessments of ourselves. If respecting others properly is the result of being a just person, then having proper self-respect is similarly the result of the virtue of justice, especially since we cannot genuinely have one without the other. Justice ensures that equals are treated as equals.

We may note happily that thoroughly vicious, full-blown arrogance is not too common. Still, it is all too common for people to occasionally think more highly of themselves than they deserve. Arrogance comes in degrees, and most people probably arrogate just a little at least once in a while. As Butler (1900) notes, it is natural for us to not mistrust ourselves and we are inclined to be overly partial to ourselves (and whatever we love).<sup>16</sup> It is not uncommon for human beings to be arrogant and so, to that degree, need to be "taken down a notch". Thus, humility ought to enter the picture. Just as it is common for people to be inappropriately tempted, and so in need of continence, it is also common for us to get a bit too full of ourselves and be in need of humility. But insofar as we succeed in embodying justice and giving ourselves and others the respect everyone is due (and no more than that), our judgment is sound, and we are not in need of correction. If so, we have no need for humility.

Humility allows us to combat what is otherwise self-aggrandizing in our nature. It is always bad to be arrogant, but that does not make it good to always have humility, for only a few of us are always self-aggrandizing and some of us never are. To see humility as a corrective is to adopt an appropriately humble theory of humility.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

While there are many theories of what makes a character trait be a virtue, there is agreement among theorists that the virtues are character traits that are excellences of some kind. It is not possible to reliably do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reasons, without manifesting those excellences of character which are the virtues. So, these are traits that manifest behavior which is never inapt. Humility does not fit this model. While humility is vastly important and is not to be underrated for its value in correcting arrogance, in a secular world of interaction between equals, humility's only value is this corrective function. There are times when it is simply wrong to have or feel humility, in a way that it cannot be wrong to have wisdom, courage, justice, or temperance. It therefore makes more sense to take humility "down a notch" from being considered a virtue to seeing it as a developmental phase, like continence, which one passes through on the way to virtue. Therefore, humility is not a virtue.

## Notes

- 1 My thanks go to the following philosophers for helpful comments and suggestions: Julia Annas, Heather Battaly, Anka Finger, Mitch Green, Hanna Gunn, Raja Halwani, Allan Hazlett, Drew Johnson, Brendan Kane, Suzy Killmister, Fred Lee, Hallie Liberto, Nate Sheff, Mark Timmons, and Sam Wheeler. I'm grateful to the editors of this volume for their helpful conversations and comments on the paper, especially Alessandra Tanesini, who gave extensive comments on the paper which greatly improved it. Finally, this publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.
- 2 In Fanny Burney's novel *Evelina*, from 1778, a well-born character "thinks it incumbent upon her to support the dignity of her ancestry. Fortunately for the world in general, she has taken it into her head, that condescension is the most distinguishing virtue of high life; so that the same pride of family which renders others imperious, is with her the motive of affability".
- 3 My use of the word "corrective" is different from that of Philippa Foot (2002, pp. 8–12), who argues that all the virtues are "correctives", referencing Aristotle's thought that the virtues are about what is naturally difficult for people. But all agree that practicing continence does not leave one in a virtuous state, even if it gets a person to do what a truly virtuous (temperate) person would do in those circumstances. Continence is a stop-gap measure, which is far from the self-regulation of desire required for temperance.
- 4 The psychologist L. A. Pervin understands a character trait roughly as "a disposition to behave expressing itself in consistent patterns of functioning across a range of situations" (1994, p. 108). There are good reasons, however, to follow Christian Miller (2014, chapter 1) and normatively narrow the range of personality traits that will count as character traits. On such a view, character traits are those personality traits for which a person is responsible, and which also open a person to normative assessment.  
Alessandra Tanesini (2016) refers to humility as an "attitude", using this term as it figures in psychological literature. Since "attitude" already has such an extensive use in moral philosophy, I prescind from following that terminology here. Still, despite how Tanesini refers to humility as a virtue, and as an attitude, the present account is in many ways similar to hers in spirit.
- 5 My thanks to Smit and Timmons (2015) for this quote.
- 6 Thus, I am in sympathy with Nancy Snow's (1995) discussion of "existential humility". This is reminiscent of Iris Murdoch's (1970) claim that "[h]umility is 'selfless respect for reality'". The degree to which she conceives of it as a corrective to the "fat relentless ego" is the degree to which she agrees with the present account.

One might also wonder whether we should always feel humility since we may always compare ourselves with people more virtuous than we are, or compared to the ideal of virtuous perfection, thereby always being reminded of our faults. Here, I follow Aristotle (1941), saying that the right thing to feel is "emulation":

Emulation is pain caused by seeing the presence, in persons whose nature is like our own, of good things that are highly valued and are possible for ourselves to acquire; but it is felt not because others have these goods, but because we have not got them ourselves. It is therefore a good feeling felt by good persons, whereas envy is a bad feeling felt by bad persons. Emulation makes us take steps to secure the good things in question, envy makes us take steps to stop our neighbor having them (*Rhetoric*, Bk. II, 11, 30–8).

I learned of this helpful distinction between emulation and envy, in contexts such as these, from Smit and Timmons (2015).

- 7 For ease of exposition, I elide the differences between "having humility" and "being humble" in order to use the adjective "humble", since "humility" has no adjectival nor adverbial form. In fact, being humble and having humility are quite different: a person can act reliably humble in front of others and yet be quietly confident or even arrogant in his or her heart.
- 8 If Tank Man's action seems even possibly humble to you, please substitute in some other act of civil disobedience which is impossible to read this way. Perhaps the mass suicide of Jews at Masada in the year 73 CE will suffice. Or perhaps the way Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists when they won Olympic medals in Mexico, 16 October 1968. Or think of the famous picture, taken 9 July 2016, of Ieshia Evans as she stood in a flowing sundress in front of police wearing riot gear outside the Baton Rouge Police Department, following the killing of Alton Sterling. For the picture

- of Smith and Carlos see, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968\\_Olympics\\_Black\\_Power\\_salute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968_Olympics_Black_Power_salute); and for the picture of Evans, [www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-police-ieshiaevans/nurse-in-u-s-protest-phot-o-says-she-felt-she-had-to-face-police-idUSKCN0ZV1YJ](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-police-ieshiaevans/nurse-in-u-s-protest-phot-o-says-she-felt-she-had-to-face-police-idUSKCN0ZV1YJ).
- 9 Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder (this volume) try to escape the sort of problem which the *reductio* presents by saying that humility is sometimes a virtue and sometimes is not, and to “limit its importance”. This is in effect a denial of premise 1, or the idea that traits which are virtues have “fields of action” in which they are guaranteed to yield correct action. But if humility is sometimes *not* a virtue, then we cannot count on the trait of humility to tell us when to be humble or not. Humility itself can no longer give us normative guidance. I take up these themes about “virtues in excess”, discussing and criticizing Gary Watson’s (1984) response to the problem in my paper “Virtues are Excellences” (manuscript).
  - 10 The idea that we are naturally partial to ourselves is, of course, not new. See for example, Plato (1993) and Butler’s “Sermon on Self-Deceit” (1900).
  - 11 To this degree, I agree with Richards (1988) and Roberts and Wood (2007), all of whom claim that humility is antagonistic to arrogance, vanity, etc. Our disagreement, however, is over whether or not humility is a virtue.
  - 12 For a heterodox view, see Stohr (2003).
  - 13 For more on temperance, see chapter 3 of Bloomfield (2014) and my “Temperance, Continence, Weakness, Compulsion” (manuscript).
  - 14 For discussion, see Dillon (2004) and (2015). While I follow (Dillon on) Kant in his understanding of *arrogance*, I do not follow him in his view of *humility*, which seems to me to have too many theistic connotations. Still, I am in broad sympathy with much of Dillon’s understanding of humility.
  - 15 For further discussion, see Bloomfield (2011), (2014), and (forthcoming).
  - 16 In a footnote labeled “(b)” in section 8 of Butler’s “Sermon on Self-Deceit” (1900), he notes that not everyone tends toward self-partiality in this way: we can deceive ourselves into thinking we deserve less respect than we are due as well. For more on this idea, and the “imposter syndrome”, see Kolligian and Sternberg (1990).

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