

Jennifer Cole Wright (ed.), *Humility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 408 pages. ISBN 9780190864873 (hbk). Hardback/paperback: £64/19.99

Hume regarded humility as a “monkish virtue”, and it is widely thought to be contrary to Aristotle’s *megalopsychia* (greatness of soul) (see Hume, David *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1751/2006)). Given certain popular conceptions of humility, it is not hard to see why this should be. Aquinas, for instance, describes humility as involving ‘self-abasement to the lowest place’, which hardly seems like a healthy or happy ideal, and seems out of place in any healthy polis (see Aquinas, Thomas *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1948)). These concerns about humility may have caused the relative lack of interest in it over the past decades. Whilst courage, kindness, and justice, for example, are widely agreed upon as virtues and have been extensively discussed, humility has remained somewhat peripheral. The contributors to this volume all regard this as an error and attempt to offer conceptions of humility that highlight its deep importance.

*Humility* brings together contributions from a variety of perspectives in order to make a case for humility. Philosophy, psychology and religious ethics are represented, and – more surprisingly – so are business and sports ethics. Throughout the book there is a strong practical bent: the authors are interested not only with how we conceptualise humility, but with the kinds of actions, upbringings and social arrangements that will provide spaces for it to flourish. There are too many chapters in the collection to be able to do justice to each, so I will here give an overview of the collection as a whole and discuss a couple of chapters in detail.

First, the authors in this volume are generally keen to reject the suggestion that humility is connected with self-denigration or low self-esteem. Some draw on philosophical reasons to argue that there is no necessary connection between humility and low self-esteem; others offer psychological evidence that the two do not seem to be correlated. Rather than low self-esteem, the authors instead suggest that humility involves an accurate self-conception or awareness of one’s limitations. Bobb offers a nice illustration of humility’s connection with proper pride through a discussion of humility and humiliation in the life of Frederick Douglass. He notes that the virtue of humility that Douglass exemplified in later life had nothing in common with the humiliation he endured in earlier life, and identifies the key difference here as being the healthy pride that accompanies proper humility. Vestigial traces of the self-denigration view nonetheless remain in Wielenberg, who suggests that humility involves awareness of our limitations and relative insignificance, and in Morinis, who suggests that self-denigration can play a transitional role in undermining our natural propensity towards arrogance. But even these authors emphasise that humility does not involve persisting self-denigration or low self-esteem.

A second recurring theme is that the authors regard humility as not only a matter of self-conception, but also as involving a disposition to appreciative engagement with others. Mosher et al, for example, describe the humble person as having an other-oriented stance, Narvaez discusses the humble person’s openness and appreciation of both other people and the natural world, Wright describes humility as freeing us to attend to and appreciate things beyond the self, and Kesebir argues that humility allows one to connect to others and the world. This also relates to the above concern: by understanding the humble person’s focus as being others (or the world) rather than the self, the authors understand humility in terms of positive appreciation, not mere absence of self-focus. Wright, Narvaez and Wielenberg draw on something like this thought to

motivate the idea that experiences of awe can play an important role in the cultivation of humility, functioning as catalysts to draw us out of ourselves and towards an appreciative engagement with the world.

A third interesting feature of this collection is that various authors extend the scope of humility beyond intrapersonal and interpersonal situations to cover our relations to the natural world. This is most extensively discussed in Narvaez, who identifies ‘ecological humility’ as a distinct type alongside intrapersonal, interpersonal and community humility. Her conception of ecological humility is largely parallel to the other types: it requires us to appreciate and honour the natural world, not view ourselves as entitled to a disproportionate amount of resources, and it requires us to facilitate flourishing for the whole biocommunity. This seems like a valuable contribution to our understanding of humility and what it might require.

While the first section of the book mainly discusses the nature of humility, the second section discusses humility in various applied contexts: care homes, hospices, competitive contexts, management, and politics. These provide an illuminating illustration of what humility might require in these concrete situations, as well as making a strong case that humility has a powerful role to play in society at large. Particularly striking is Roberts and Spezio’s discussion of the alternative model of care in L’Arche communities, which they suggest manifests ‘humble love’. Within such houses, ‘Assistants’ live alongside intellectually disabled members not simply as caregivers but as co-members of an egalitarian community: rather than assuming that the Assistants’ role is to unilaterally help the intellectually disabled members, such communities re-envision the relationship as one in which each individual is an equal and valued participant in a community.

Austin’s discussion of humility in competitive contexts is particularly interesting. On the face of it, humility seems to be opposed to competitiveness. But Austin suggests that the dominant warfare-like model of competition is mistaken, and that humility is consistent with and apt for proper competitiveness. He argues that we ought to replace the warfare model of competition with a cooperative model in which “[c]ompetitors strive together to achieve excellence” (p. 261), a model in which competitors are not seen as opposing armies set to destroy one another, but partners seeking to together achieve excellence. The warfare model of competitiveness, he argues, does not make sense of the notion that mere participation in a sport or excellence short of winning can be valuable. By contrast, he argues that the cooperative model enables us to properly value competitive games or activities in themselves, and thus provides a desirable model of competitive contexts. This is a very interesting argument and I found it plausible. But it would have been nice to address some worries on behalf of the warfare model. If, say, participants who conceived of their activities on this model were higher achieving than those who conceived of their activity on the competitive model, would Austin still argue that the cooperative model properly values competitive excellence?

The final section of the volume turns from the ‘moral humility’ explored in the first sections to ‘intellectual humility’. This section is composed of only two chapters, and it feels a shame to have so little exploration of it. It would also have been nice to hear more about the relation between the moral humility discussed in the first two sections and the intellectual humility discussed in the last. Haggard identifies intellectual humility as a distinct psychological trait falling between intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility that allows people to ‘own’ their intellectual limitations whilst nonetheless seeking intellectual improvement. Haggard’s claim that intellectual humility does not involve servility, for example, is of a kind with the general

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rejection of the idea that humility involves self-denigration discussed above, but the idea that the intellectually humble person should seek to be driven by a general desire to seek the truth seems to be distinctive to intellectual humility.

Nguyen argues that we ought to respond with intellectual humility to disagreements, which entails recognising our epistemic fallibility and letting the disagreement influence our confidence in our beliefs. Focusing on ‘unsecured judgements’ (a judgement where “the judger’s degree of confidence exceeds their justificatory resources” (p. 330)), he suggests that unless one has reason to believe that the other person’s cognitive system is faulty, then one should regard the entitlement to self-trust that applies in one’s own case as also applying in their case. He thus suggests that others’ beliefs impinge on the justification for one’s own beliefs and that we ought to at least lower our confidence in our beliefs given disagreement. Interestingly, he argues that this is consistent with the existence of an ‘understanding requirement’ in the moral or aesthetic domains, since it is only a requirement to lower one’s confidence in one’s beliefs, not to form positive beliefs on the basis of testimony. It would have been nice to hear a bit more about this, especially in cases where we *do* think that we have a story about why others are mistaken. For example, we often attribute moral views we disagree with to selfishness, or aesthetic judgements we disagree with to misplaced snobbery. It is not clear what Nguyen thinks intellectual humility requires of us in these cases.

This volume makes a number of contributions to discussions of humility. I would recommend it to anyone interested in the topic.

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