The Twin Dimensions of the Virtue of Humility: Low Self-Focus and High Other-Focus

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Although humility is often equated in people's minds with low self-regard and tends to activate images of the stoop-shouldered, self-deprecating, weak-willed soul only too willing to yield to the wishes of others, in reality humility is the antithesis of this caricature.

--Robert A. Emmons (1998, p. 33)

Introduction

Humility is one of the strangest of the traditional virtues. On the one hand, it is associated with positive traits—being down-to-earth, keeping one's accomplishments in proper perspective, being less self-occupied, and displaying a willingness to help (and forgive) others. On the other hand, it has been associated with traits such as low-mindedness, self-abasement, self-denigration, and even self-loathing.

For these and related reasons, philosophers and psychologists have found humility puzzling and problematic. It is one thing to insist that humility requires us to understand our proper place and to focus more on others than we focus on ourselves. It is another thing altogether to insist that we view ourselves as inherently corrupted, vile, and wretched—as some prominent theologians have suggested. Given the more extreme

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conceptions of humility, it is no wonder that many philosophers have dismissed humility. Nor should we be surprised by how little it has been empirically studied.

But before we pass judgment on humility (whether positive or negative), we must first decide what we take it to be (and not to be). Whether we follow St. Aquinas and others in defining humility as "self-abasement to the lowest place" (*ST,* II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 2) or instead define it more innocuously as the capacity to keep one's accomplishments and self-worth in perspective, this initial definition will influence what we conclude about the nature and value of humility. This problem is not just a tempest in a philosophical teapot—it is critical to the empirical study of humility as well.

Our first goal in this paper is to briefly explore the most prominent and influential view of humility put forward by theologians and philosophers and highlight the shortcomings and limitations of this view (§1). Next, we turn our attention to the psychological literature on humility (§2). Psychologists (like the philosophers and theologians before them) have been challenged by their disagreement about what humility is—and how it is best operationalized. They have also faced the challenge of measurement. Given the nature of humility, you can't ask people whether they are humble without raising worries about expectancy, social desirability, and self-enhancement. This problem has prompted one prominent researcher to conclude that, "by its very nature, the construct of humility poses some special challenges to researchers" (Tangney 2000, 75) and that humility "may represent one of those relatively rare personality constructs that is simply unamenable to self-report methods" (Tangney 2000, 78).

While these concerns about humility must be taken seriously, we think there is nonetheless a philosophically respectable and empirically tractable model of humility worth considering. By way of explanation, we will present our account of the twin dimensions of humility—namely, (a) *low self-focus*, i.e., being hypo-egoistically decentered and aware of one's place in the grander scheme of things, and (b) *high other-focus*, i.e., being attuned to the needs and interests of others and sensitive to the fact that others have moral standing, which requires our respect and attention (§3).

After laying out our own account, we will then discuss its virtues. Then having placed our proverbial cards on the table, we will turn to our empirical exploration of humility, thusly defined (§4)—for which we adopted a multi-pronged approach. First, we explored the folk concept of humility in children, adolescents, and adults. Second, we developed a self-report scale for measuring humility indirectly—thereby avoiding the worry raised earlier (and in §2). Third, we used linguistic analysis to explore how humble people write, both in general and specifically about humility. Finally, we explored the relationship between humility and other morally relevant attributes and indicators of psychological wellbeing. The findings from these projects collectively lend support to our account.

Finally, in §5, we will briefly discuss the possibility that humility is a foundational or meta-virtue—that humility may be a "gateway" virtue, necessary for the acquisition and/or full development of other virtues. On this view, unless and until an individual is sufficiently humble, she is not in the proper epistemic and ethical position to behave in ways that are morally mature—she is not fully virtuous. Having gestured at this

possibility—which is an idea we are developing more fully elsewhere—we conclude by setting the stage for future work in humility research.

As should be expected, our quest to better understand the nature and value of humility has been a humbling experience—and there is much yet to be done at the cross-roads of philosophy and psychology before we can fully understand this elusive yet foundational virtue.

Section 1. The Philosophy of Humility

One issue that arises in the literature on humility is whether it is a trait with its own set of features or is simply the absence of other negative traits such as pride, arrogance, haughtiness, hubris, and the like—in other words, whether people *possess* humility or simply *lack* various negative traits. Perhaps this is due to the family of related concepts that have historically been associated with humility. In the Old Testament, for instance, pride and arrogance are often picked out as chief vices to be avoided. On this view, while the proud and high-minded will be punished for adopting an inflated, self-important attitude, being sufficiently low-minded is a way of keeping oneself in God's graces. It is therefore to be expected that when humility is mentioned in the Old Testament (which is not as common as one might think), it is often *the act of being humbled* that is identified as important.

This conception of humility carries over into the New Testament where the act of being humbled is once again presented as a pathway to salvation. Indeed for some,

humility is viewed by some as a cornerstone of Christian spirituality,[2] a virtue that both

does and should play an essential role in our moral and spiritual lives.

For present purposes, we'll call this religious conception of humility the "self-

abasement view"—a view whereby we should actively and openly acknowledge our

lowliness and insignificance in relation to God's greatness. This way of understanding

humility was taken to its extreme during the Middle Ages—a historical twist that set the

stage for hundreds of years of debate. Consider the following representative passages:

- "When a man reflects on these things…He will be filled with fear and trembling,

  as he becomes conscious of his own lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance

  … He will then realize he is a vessel full of shame, dishonor, and reproach, empty

  and deficient" ~Maimonides, 12th century (1972, p. 48).

- "If this device [humbling oneself before God] is properly understood in its

  subtlety, it is nothing else but a true knowledge and experience of yourself as you

  are, a wretch, filth, far worse than nothing. This knowledge and experience is

  humility." ~*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 14th Century (1981, p.181).

According to this, not only does humility require us to have a low-minded attitude

towards our accomplishments and self-worth, but also to engage in active self-abasement

(and perhaps even self-loathing).

This extreme version of religious humility drew the critical glance of

philosophers, ranging from Spinoza and Hume to Nietzsche and Sidgwick. If humility

requires "self-abasement to the lowest place" (*ST,* II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 2) as St.

Aquinas and others have suggested, then it is hard to see how it could be a virtue—

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[2] Some have even claimed that humility "was a quintessentially Christian discovery" (Konkola 2005, p. 185).

especially when a certain degree of dignity, self-worth, and self-esteem contribute to our health and happiness. Given the historical association between humility and humiliation, self-degradation, shame, and the like—and the view of the humble person as someone "who accepts his lowly position as *due him*" (Taylor, 1985, p. 17, emphasis added)—it is no wonder that humility fell out of fashion in the wake of the Enlightenment.

One strategy to salvage humility's status as a virtue was to "remove the negative baggage from the traditional conception of religious humility" to see if anything valuable remained (Hare, 1996, p. 235). If humility could be conceptualized in ways that eschewed self-abasement (and the metaphysical and epistemic inaccuracies that undergirded it) then more could be said in defense of treating it as a virtue.

In order to sidestep the self-abasement view, some adopted a more positive conception of humility whereby the genuinely humble person could have a perfectly accurate appreciation for her own value, skills, and abilities—she just couldn't give it much thought or grant it much importance. According to this view, one need not be self-deprecating to be humble—one need only to "keep one's accomplishments, traits, abilities…in perspective, even if stimulated to exaggerate them" (Richards, 1988, p. 256; see also Snow, 1995). In other words, humility might not require us to hold ourselves in low regard, but rather just to not be *enamored with* ourselves. Like previous views, this account involved a "reduction" of the self—but here it was a "decentering" rather than a "decreasing." We cease to experience ourselves as the center the universe and recognize that there is more out there to think about, and to *care* about, than ourselves.

The chief benefit of this more positive conception of humility should be clear—because being humble merely requires the absence of self-importance and the ability to

keep one's ego in check, it involves neither self-deception nor self-abasement. Plus, this view is compatible with both self-esteem and self-understanding—two important traits that cannot be easily accommodated by other accounts of humility. This makes it easier to consider humility a virtue.

One of the key issues when it comes to the on-going debate about humility is where we should begin—that is, which variety of humility should we embrace and which should we eschew? From what we've said in the preceding pages, it's probably clear which variety we prefer—accounts of humility that allow us to treat it as a virtue seem preferable to those that force us to treat it as a vice.[3] But before we present our own positive account of the core of humility (§3) and discuss the evidence we believe supports it (§4), we should briefly explore the ways psychologists have defined and operationalized humility.

Section 2. The Psychology of Humility

Humility is a relatively "neglected virtue in the social and psychological sciences" (Tangney, 2000, p. 70). Given the recent resurgence of interest in the virtues coming from positive psychology, this neglect is somewhat surprising—but, as Tangney (2000) has pointed out, there are two primary hurdles to studying humility which help explain it.

The first is that before researchers can study humility, they must first consistently define it. Given humility's tangled history, this is no simple task. Some researchers (e.g., Klein, 1992; Knight & Nadel, 1986; Langston & Cantor, 1988; Weiss & Knight, 1980) adopted the traditional "self-abasement" view—borrowing from dictionary definitions of humility, such as "the quality of being humble or of having a lowly opinion of oneself;

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[3] For a defense of this view, see Nadelhoffer et al. (under review).

meekness, lowliness, humbleness: the opposite of pride or haughtiness" (Oxford English Dictionary) or "lowly in kind, state, condition, etc.; of little worth, unimportant…having a sense of insignificance, unworthiness, dependence, or sinfulness" (Funk & Wagnail's Standard College Dictionary).

Others have adopted more positive conceptions of humility. Tangney (2000) defines humility as having (a) an accurate assessment of one's talents and achievements, (b) the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations, (c) an openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice, and (d) a general appreciation of the value of other people and things. Others define it along similar lines—such as having a moderate or accurate view of oneself (Baumeister & Exline, 2002; Emmons, 1999; Rowatt et al.2002; Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Tangney, 2000, 2009), often accompanied by a relative lack of self-preoccupation (Tangney, 2000; Templeton, 1997) or desire to distort information, or otherwise "self-enhance" or make oneself look and feel better (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), as well as an open-minded willingness to admit mistakes, seek new information, and a general desire to learn (Hwang, 1982; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Templeton, 1997).

Yet others have defined humility in terms of interpersonal qualities—such as empathy, gentleness, respect, and appreciation for the equality, autonomy, and value of others (Halling, Kunz, & Rowe, 1994; Means, Wilson, Sturm, Bion, & Bach, 1990; Sandage, 1999; Tangney, 2002, 2009), gratitude (Emmons, 2007), a willingness to share credit for accomplishments and acknowledge mistakes (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004), an openness to new or divergent ideas (Gantt, 1976; Harrell & Bond, 2006; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Neuringer,

1991; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Templeton, 1995), and a willingness to surrender oneself to God or some other transcendent power (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Murray, 2001; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007). Relatedly, Rowden (2009) defines humility as a shift from the narrow preoccupation with self *or* other into the broader consideration of self *and* other.

Even with these more positive empirical accounts of humility, some important worries linger. For one, these accounts conflate humility with other constructs. For example, the most prominent views of humility—as a VIA character strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) or as a factor in the HEXACO account of personality (Lee & Ashton, 2004)—mix features of humility with other constructs, such as modesty (both views), honesty, sincerity, greed-avoidance, and fairness (HEXACO only). Yet, recent data— including our own—suggest that humility is distinct from these constructs (Davis et al., 2010; Wright et al. 2015).

In addition, most of the empirical accounts of humility suffer from the same basic flaw: they do not specify which of the attributes or qualities listed constitute the *core* of humility, and which are simply related to humility—e.g., as a precursor, a parallel process, or a downstream consequence. Humble people may indeed possess and express all of the above attributes and qualities, and they may even do so *because* they are humble. But, that does not mean that those attributes and qualities are humility. Indeed, our worry is that while these approaches capture some of the psychological preconditions of humility—as well as some of the interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of being humble—they nevertheless fail to illuminate the core of humility itself (more on this in §3).

The second hurdle is that humility is an "elusive virtue"—difficult to measure, especially via traditional self-report. As Davis, Worthington, and Hook (2010) have pointed out, "self-reports of high levels of humility may ironically indicate a lack of humility" (246). That is, while narcissists are more likely to self-enhance, genuinely humble (or modest) individuals are more likely to either not self-enhance or underestimate their own humility.

In response to this, researchers have adopted approaches to studying dispositional humility that don't involve self-report—relying on informant ratings of humility (Lee et al., 2010; Rowatt et al., 2006; and Davis et al., 2010), implicit association tests for humility (Powers et al., 2007; Rowatt et al., 2006), or participants' comparisons of self to others (Rowatt et al., 2002). At the same time, however, self-report measures have several advantages, which some have argued outweigh the risks (for a review, see Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). And a few self-report measures of humility have been developed—the two most prominent being the Modesty-Humility (M-H) subscale of the Values in Action scale (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and the Honesty-Humility (H-H) subscale of HEXACO (Lee & Ashton, 2004).[4]

While it is important for researchers to have as many tools as possible for measuring humility, we were ultimately dissatisfied with all of the extant measures (albeit for different reasons—discussed in Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, & Sinnott-Armstrong,

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[4] We examined three additional self-report measures for humility. The first two were Elliot's (2010) Humility Scale and Quiros' (2008) Healthy Humility Inventory. Both were developed for doctoral dissertations and neither (to our knowledge) has been published. The third self-report measure for humility we considered is the Dispositional Humility Scale found in Landrum (2011). To our knowledge, this scale has not yet been validated. Indeed, Landrum acknowledges in the title of the paper that the scale represents a "first approximation."

2015). Therefore, in §4 we will present the results from our own attempts to develop an indirect self-report measure of humility.

Section 3: Our Own Positive Account of Humility

Our view is that humility, at its core, is a *particular psychological positioning of oneself* within the larger context of the universe—one that is both *epistemically* and *ethically aligned*.

By "epistemically aligned", we mean that humility is the understanding and experiencing of oneself *as one, in fact, is*—namely, as a finite and fallible being that is but a very small part of something much larger than oneself. This is often experienced spiritually, as a connection to God or some higher power, though it can also be experienced through an awareness of one's place in, and connection to, the natural or cosmic order (a state of "existential awareness"). In line with this, Gerber (2002) claims, "humility stems from a person's relationship with something greater" (p. 43); Snow (1995) suggests that "a feature common to such humbling experiences is an appreciation of the value of the reality that extends beyond your circumstances or transcends limitations imposed by the human condition" (p. 208). Operationalized, this is the dimension of *low self-focus*.

By "ethically aligned", we mean that humility is the understanding and experiencing of oneself as only one among a host of other morally relevant beings, whose interests are as legitimate, and as worthy of attention and concern, as one's own (a state of "extended compassion"). In this way, humility is a corrective to our natural tendency to strongly prioritize or privilege ourselves (our needs, interests, benefits, etc.)—i.e., to

seek "premium treatment" for ourselves, even at significant cost to others. Operationalized, this is the dimension of high other-focus.

As Johnston (2009) notes, it is a phenomenological fact that we experience ourselves as the psychological center of a life that extends out of a remembered past and into an imagined future and that we experience that life as *something to be lived*—i.e., something we can shape through practical deliberation toward action, guided by conceptions of "a life worth living". Thus, we are constituted in such a way to prioritize and privilege ourselves (our lives) over others.

Humility corrects for this by bringing this into an epistemically and ethically justifiable range. Of course, what constitutes "an epistemically and ethically justifiable" range is a question that we cannot answer here—but at its pinnacle, we take it to be something like what Johnston was pointing to when he wrote:

> The independent facts of personal identity do not justify our patterns of self-concern; rather, the facts of personal identity are partly determined by those patterns of self-concern. Given that, the central commandment of Christianity – to love one's neighbor, indeed even one's enemies, as oneself – is nothing less than an *identity-reconstituting* command. The command is Janus-faced: *it requires that one love the arbitrary other as oneself, but it also requires that one love oneself objectively; that is, as just the arbitrary other whose life one is nonetheless called upon to lead*…to the extent that one carries out this commandment, one becomes present wherever and whenever human beings are present; one lives on in the onward rush of humankind and acquires a new face every time a baby is born. For

one stands to all others in the identity-constituting relation that one formerly stood in just to oneself. (p. 185, emphasis added)

Our own view of humility is similarly Janus-faced. On the one side is *low self-focus*—the shift, not in self-esteem, or even necessarily self-concern, but in *self-prioritization*—that follows from this proper psychological positioning. On the other side is *high other-focus*—the corresponding increase in one's orientation *outwards* towards other morally relevant beings, accompanied by an increased prioritization of their needs, interests, and benefits and increased concern for their well-being, as well as an increased appreciation for their value, generally speaking.[5]

We see these two intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of humility as intimately connected. As Snow (1995) points out, "to be humble is to recognize your limitations, to take them seriously, and thereby to foster a realism in attitudes and behaviors regarding *self and others*" (210, emphasis added). By keeping everything in proper perspective and adopting a realistic attitude towards ourselves and our own limitations, we are better positioned to behave appropriately towards others, especially those in need.

Importantly, this "decentering" of one's focus away from self does more than just shift one's focus to the needs and interests of others—that is, low self-focus is *more than* (and does not necessarily require) high other-focus. After all, someone could have low self-focus without being focused on the interests of others. The converse is true as well—someone could be focused on others while at the same time thinking more of herself than

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[5] Some may worry about including high other-focus as a part of humility rather than treating it something related to but distinct. In addition to what we've already said, we think there are clear historical reasons for this (consider a paradigmatic example of humility: Jesus washing his disciples' feet in John 13:1-17—after which, he instructed them to do likewise for others), and we will provide empirical evidence in §4 to further support this view.

she should. For present purposes, the kind of low self-focus we have in mind involves the reorientation of one's relationship to the outside world, highlighting the importance of keeping things in proper perspective and being mindful of one's place in the larger scheme of things. Accordingly, behavioral manifestations of low self-focus should include (among other things) a lack of desire to self-aggrandize or self-promote and an openness to new and challenging information; a simplicity in self-presentation and/or lifestyle (i.e., modesty, open-mindedness, etc.).

Ultimately, though, humility cannot emerge through low self-focus alone—it requires a shift in one's other-focus as well. This does not mean humility requires we be moral saints or to reduce ourselves to marginal utility in order to help those in need—although it would arguably be compatible with these supererogatory attitudes and behaviors—but, it does require us to be mindful, attentive, considerate, and charitable towards others, especially those who may need help or assistance or who are in harm's way. Accordingly, behavioral manifestations of high other-focus should include, among other things, a greater acceptance of others' beliefs, values, and ideas—even when different from one's own—and an increased desire to help and be of service to others (i.e., tolerance, civic-mindedness, etc.). The humble person is someone who is actively interested in promoting or protecting others' wellbeing and seeks to make a difference when/where she reasonably can.

On this view, by being invested in the lives of others—rather than merely completely absorbed with satisfying our own selfish interests—we become grounded and embedded in the world. Indeed, looked at properly, humility doesn't reduce the force or

scope of one's own needs and interests—rather, it greatly expands them. Others' well-being becomes entangled with our own.[6]

Because humility facilitates a realistic appraisal of ourselves, it removes (or reduces) the need to *inflate* or *deflate* our own value or significance, which in turn makes is less necessary to inflate or deflate our estimation of other people's value or significance. And it is this "unencumbered" encountering of others as morally valuable individuals in their own right that facilitates our appreciation for their welfare and our desire to protect and promote their interests (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012).

In this way, high other-focus serves as a counter-point to the existential aftershock that may result from the decentering associated with low self-focus. After all, there is a fine line between existential awareness and existential angst. The latter can leave us feeling isolated, alone, and anxious in a vast, cold universe. By immersing herself in the lives and interests of others, the humble person becomes grounded in a way that staves off the existential angst that could otherwise lead to nihilism rather than well-being. To have one without the other is to be either a nihilist or an egotist—neither of which is compatible with humility. Being humble strikes a middle ground between these two extremes.

It is for these and related reasons that this "decentered and devoted" view of humility suggests that being humble requires *both* low self-focus and high other-focus. The two elements are mutually reinforcing and serve as the twin dimensions of humility.

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[6] Moral exemplars say things like this (Colby & Damon, 1994). And, though they don't talk about it this way, this is the central insight of Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, & Riches (2011) "enlightened self-interest"—the weaving together of one's agentic and community values. Moral exemplars flourish personally by facilitating/contributing to the flourishing of others—they experience their own needs/interests as *bound up with* and *woven into* the needs/interests of others.

Section 4: Understanding Humility

Project 1: Exploring our Folk Concept of Humility

One way to examine whether our account of humility has merit is to investigate how well it matches up with how people normally think and talk about humility. To examine this, we worked with three different age groups—specifically middle school, high school, and adult participants (Nadelhoffer, Wright, Echols, Perini, & Venezia, 2015).[7]

In our first study we surveyed a group of 107 U.S. adults, and they were randomly assigned to one of two tasks—to describe in as much detail as possible either what a person *fully possessing*, or *completely lacking,* the virtue of humility would be like. We found that in the possessing humility condition, 89% of the participants referred to *low self-focus*—which means they made reference to either an awareness of being part of something larger, bigger than oneself, of being just one among others that are equal to oneself, and/or to a lack of desire to self-aggrandize or self-promote; a modesty in self-presentation and/or life-style. In addition, 62% of them referred to *high other-focus*—which means they made reference to the recognition of the value of others, openness to new ideas, values, belief-systems, etc. and/or to a desire to help others, placing others' needs above one's own, kindness and compassion.

Low self-focus and high other-focus were by far the most common attributes assigned to the humble exemplar, the next most common (25%) being positive psychological attributes, such as being calm, peaceful, non-materialistic, friendly, and easy-going, and (18%) other virtues, such as being admirable, dignified, honest, trustworthy, hardworking, and responsible.

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[7] The high school data was collected after, and therefore not reported in, Nadelhoffer, et al., 2015.

In the lack of humility condition, 95% referred to the *lack of* low self-focus and 52% referred to the *lack of* high other-focus. These were again the most common attributes assigned to the non-humble exemplar, the next most common (41%) being negative psychological attributes, such as being *not* calm or peaceful, as well as being greedy, self-centered, arrogant, unfriendly, uptight, ungrateful, and inappreciative, and (11%) other vices, such as being rigid, dogmatic, dominating, dishonest, and untrustworthy.[8]

When we asked 251 middle-school (6th-8th grades) and high-school (9th-12th grades) students to think about the virtue of humility and describe what someone who has a lot (i.e., someone who is very humble) is like, their responses looked similar—though we found interesting developmental trends for both dimensions. Specifically, 22% of 5th-6th graders, 54% of 7th-8th graders, 76% of 9th-10th graders, and 71% of 11th-12th graders referred to low self-focus; 15% of 5th-6th graders, 46% of 7th-8th graders, 63% of 9th-10th graders, and 67% of 11th-12th graders referred to high other-focus (Figure 1).

The next most frequent references made—especially for the middle school students—were to surprisingly negative attributes. Fifty-six percent of 5th-6th graders, 33% 7th-8th graders, and 10% of both 9th-10th and 11th-12th graders described humble people as being embarrassed or otherwise feeling badly about themselves and/or something they did, as having suffered hardship, and as being sad, lonely, or shy.

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[8] Relatedly, in Exline and Geyer (2004) people gave open-ended definitions of humility—44% made reference to "modesty" of some sort, 17% referred to unselfishness, and 19% to a lack of conceit or arrogance. Landrum (2011) found a high degree of agreement for the following statements about people possessing humility: "knows he/she is smart, but not all-knowing" (87% agreed); "has the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes and imperfections" (86%); "keeps his/her talents and accomplishments in perspective" (85%); "has an appreciation of value in all things" (85%); "has an open and receptive mind" (84%); and "has a sense of self-acceptance" (83%).
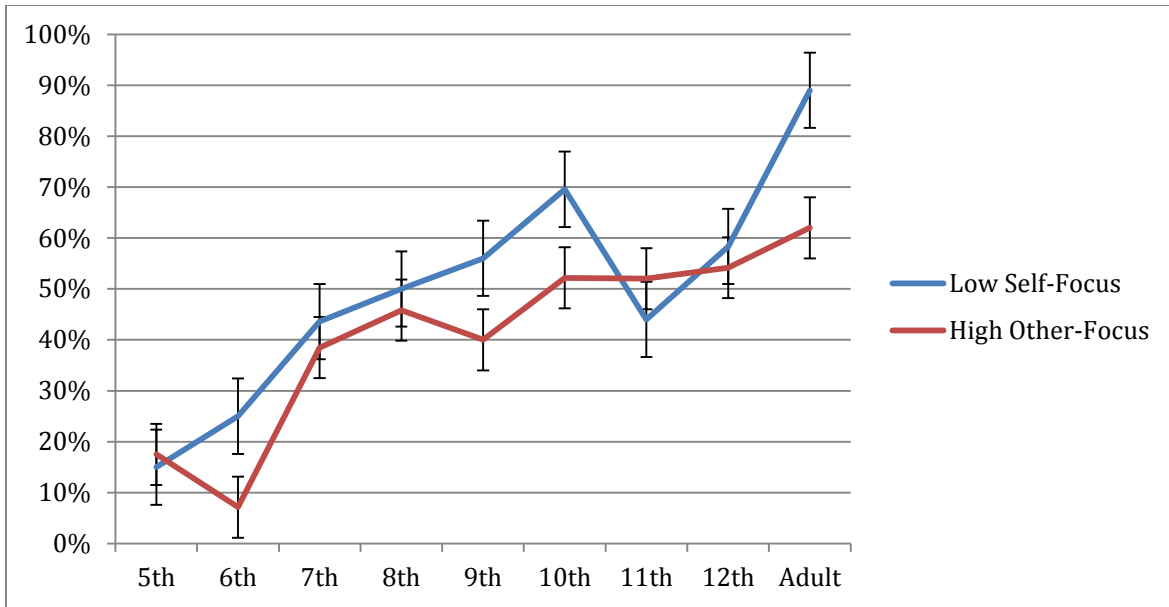
Figure 1. LSF and HOF across Age Groups

Importantly, they also referred to more positive attributes: 22% of 5th-6th graders, 35% of 7th-8th graders, and 17% of both 9th-10th and 11th-12th graders referred to positive psychological attributes, describing humble people as friendly, easy-going, simple, down-to-earth, calm, peaceful, polite, courteous, grateful, appreciative, happy, and content. They also—somewhat less frequently—referred to positive moral virtues, describing them as admirable, dignified, honest, trustworthy, wise, mature, open-minded, hardworking, reliable, and responsible.

Summary of Findings. Together, these data suggest a developing appreciation for the bi-dimensionality of humility, for the centrality of both low self-focus and high other-focus in the humble person—as well as their absence in the un-humble person. And while it could be argued that some of the other attributes and virtues assigned to the humble person (e.g., peaceful, calm, down-to-earth, polite, open-minded, etc.) flow naturally from low self-focus and high other-focus, others might be better explained as a

"halo-effect" (Thorndike, 1920) where a person high in one attribute is viewed as more likely to be high in a range of them.[9]

While at this point only suggestive, we were also intrigued by the fact that the children referenced negative attributes for the humble person, increasingly so the younger they were. In Nadelhoffer, et al. (2015), we suggested that this might be because our earliest introductions to humility can be negative—being "put in our place," shamed for being selfish or a braggart, etc. And we still think this is a reasonable explanation of the data, especially since our high-schoolers—at the age where Piaget's (1952) formal operations begin to develop, which facilitates abstract perspective-taking, empathy, and a shift into epistemic relativism (Chandler, Boyes, & Ball, 1990; Kuhn, Cheney, & Weinstock, 2000)—the reference to negative attributes is greatly reduced, almost disappearing altogether in our adult data.[10]

Of course, an alternative explanation is that the younger participants simply don't have a solid grasp on the concept of humility yet—hence, the lower reference to low self-focus and high other-focus and greater reference to negative attributes. Given that, unlike virtues such as honesty and bravery, humility does not get a lot of press (especially with children), this is not an unreasonable alternative hypothesis. A more comprehensive investigation of this issue is required.

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[9] This would make sense given any sort of a "unity of virtues" account, even a modest one. As unrelated as some virtues might appear to be (e.g., being brave and being kind seem to require a very different set of capacities and skills), it is nonetheless the case that any person actively (as opposed to accidentally) developing and expressing one of the virtues would see good reason for developing and expressing the other as well—especially if humility is a foundational virtue (§4).

[10] Exline and Geyer (2004) found something similar, showing that some participants associated humility with shame, humiliation, or embarrassment (10%) or a submissive or passive attitude (5%). Some individuals (14%) also remarked on a potential downside of humility, noting that the humble person was timid, quiet, or unassertive. And while we did not find much evidence for this in our adult sample (only 2%), we did find that a small percentage (5%) made reference to some form of embarrassment or humiliation being present in their past personal experiences of humility. Collectively, this suggests that one road to becoming humble is *being humbled*.

Project 2: Measuring Humility

With our proposed account of humility in hand, we wanted to develop a way to measure its presence (or absence). While a variety of approaches to measuring humility have been developed—see §2 for details—we decided to pursue the development of a first-person scale, one that took steps to mitigate the worries associated with self-report measures we discussed earlier (Davis et al., 2010; see also Tangney, 2002, 2009) by approaching humility indirectly.

As discussed earlier, the two most prominent humility self-report measures are the Values in Action Inventory Modesty-Humility subscale (VIA; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and the HEXACO Honesty-Humility subscale (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Unfortunately, neither scale was appropriate for our purposes, their characterization of humility being inconsistent with our own. Plus, both rely on direct self-report questions— e.g., "I am always humble about the good things that happen to me"—which makes people's responses especially vulnerable to the worries (e.g., self-desirability, self-enhancement) already discussed.

In addition, as mentioned in §3, they both mixed humility with other related, though arguably distinct, constructs. As a consequence, neither has more than a few items actually targeting *humility*—and therefore wouldn't provide the sort of fine-grained data we were after. Thus, we developed and validated our own scale (Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015) that contained 25 items with five different subscales (5 items each; see Appendix). Self-focus was measured indirectly through three subscales—religious humility and secular (cosmic and environmental) humility—along

with other-focus and a fifth sub-scale best conceptualized as an measure of people's attitudes about humility (value of humility).

In addition to items designed to measure our account of humility, we included items designed to measure other constructs—open-mindedness, tolerance, public vs. personal modesty, arrogance, entitlement, and moral flexibility vs. steadfastness—in order to verify that they were empirically distinct from humility, as we'd conceived it. This was confirmed—though correlated with our humility items (as we would expect) they nonetheless loaded into separate factors, even when factoring was forced (see Wright et al., 2015).

Religious humility is moderately correlated— rs between .13-.26, ps < .004— with secular (cosmic and environmental) humility, value of humility, and other-focus. Both aspects of secular humility are strongly correlated with each other—$r = .56$, $p <$ .001—as well as value of humility, and other-focus—rs between .41-.53, ps < .001.

As we shall see when we turn to the significance of humility—in terms of its capacity to predict other positive psychological and moral attributes—it is important to examine the role of each of these subscales separately. Though a composite "humility" score can be computed by averaging all 25 items together, interpreting its meaning is tricky. Consider—would a person who scored high on all three subscales of low self-focus count as having "more humility" than an atheist who scored high only on the secular measures? That seems problematic. Thus, perhaps the best interpretation of a composite score would be as representing greater or lesser *opportunities for*, or *expressions of*, humility—rather than higher or lower humility itself.

Project 3: Exploring How Humble People Write

Having developed a scale, we were interested in exploring other ways to detect humility. We hypothesized that humility might be reflected in the way people express themselves—for example, in how they write about things—especially in situations where their humility would be relevant, such as addressing someone who disagrees about an important issue.

To examine this, we asked 250 U.S. adult participants to respond in an essay format to questions designed to capture both low self-focus and high other-focus. Specifically, they were asked to reflect on their relationship with (or to) each of the following, presented in a randomized order: (a) the surrounding universe or cosmos, (b) God or a higher power, (c) the earth and the environment, and (d) fellow human beings. They were asked to describe, as best they could, the nature of each of these relationships and their beliefs and attitudes about them (Perini, Langville, Wright & Nadelhoffer, 2015).

From this, we isolated both humble and non-humble passages (agreed upon by four independent coders and correlated with participants' humility scores by between 78-100%), which were then compared to one another. We examined the frequency of terms, parts of speech, and semantic categories to determine which were over-represented in the humble corpus relative to the non-humble corpus, and vice versa.

This revealed that, relative to the non-humble passages, the humble passages included more *inclusive* language (e.g., "we", "us", "our", as well as "all", "together", "everything"), whereas the non-humble passages included more *exclusive* language (e.g., "they", "them", "people", "my own", "some", etc.). The humble passages also used

"and" much more frequently; the non-humble passages more frequently used "or". Generally speaking, the humble passages used language designed to break down boundaries and hierarchies, maintain equality, and emphasize connection, whereas the non-humble passages used language intended to express skepticism, impose judgment, assert superiority, and emphasize disconnection.

These preliminary analyses suggest that a person's humility "leaks through" when she is reflecting on her relationships to the world around her and to others. Though there is much yet to be done before we can generalize these patterns, we are hopeful that eventually we'll have a reliable way to detect the presence (or absence) of humility.

Project 4: Exploring the Value of Humility

Despite differences of opinion concerning how humility should be measured—if it can be measured at all—there is wide-spread agreement in the empirical literature that cultivating humility is a good thing. For example, studies using the "honesty-humility" construct (measured by the HEXACO, Ashton & Lee, 2008) found that it correlated with lower rates of infidelity. People low in honesty-humility were more likely to commit moral transgressions—and less likely to admit it (Hilbig, Moshagen, & Zettler, 2015). People high in honesty-humility were more cooperative, and more responsive to incentives for cooperation (Ashton & Lee, 2008; Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013)—in economic trade games, they made more fair allocations and acted more cooperatively, refraining from exploiting their trade partner even when they had the chance to do so (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009). Individual differences in honesty-humility were negatively related to manipulativeness, dishonesty, infidelity, vengefulness, social dominance, and

other antisocial behaviors, while being positively related to integrity and a range of other morally relevant capacities (for an overview, see Ashton et al., 2004).

Others have found similar results. Davis et al. (2011) found humility to be positively correlated with forgiveness and empathy, while negatively related to avoidance and revenge. And higher levels of perceived humility in others was related to higher ratings of both warmth-based and conscientiousness-based virtues. Landrum (2011) found humility to be correlated with the willingness to admit to mistakes, acknowledgement of gaps in knowledge, openness, flexibility, compassion for others, and being smart but knowing that one is not all knowing. Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey (2013) found that cultural humility—characterized as respect and lack of superiority toward an individual's cultural background and experience—fostered a productive alliance between therapists and their clients. Moreover, clients' perceptions of their therapists' cultural humility predicted their overall improvement in therapy.

There are also a number of documented social benefits of humility for humble people themselves. For example, humble people avoid the pitfalls of boasting and grandiose attitudes, both of which generate negative impressions in other people (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997). Since humility leads to higher levels of cooperation, sharing, and a lack of self-preoccupation, it is also likely to foster closer ties with one's friends, family, and romantic partners (Friesen, 2001). Indeed, romantic partners who had recently been hurt in their relationships, but who perceived their partners as humble, were more likely forgive them for the hurt (Davis et al., 2011, 2012). And Davis et al. (2013) found

humility to be positively related to greater group status and acceptance, helping to form and repair relationships with strong social bonds.

Our Findings. Given our account of humility, we expected its subscales to be related, in differing degrees, to two things: 1) "other-oriented" and otherwise morally relevant capacities and attributes, and 2) indicators of psychological health and wellbeing. In addition, we expected religious humility specifically to be related to other measures of mature religiosity and spirituality.

With respect to the first prediction, we found (Wright, et al., 2015; Wright, Nadelhoffer, & Ross, 2015) that people's humility subscales were all positively correlated[11] with their sense of civic-responsibility and desire to meaningfully contribute to their communities (Furco, et al., 1998), as well as concern for the welfare of people in their lives and appreciation for the importance of community values and traditions (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), and their commitment to living an honest, principled life (Schlenker, 2008).

In addition, all but religious humility were positively correlated with the strength of their humanitarian-egalitarian ideals (Katz & Hass, 1988), their commitment to the understanding, appreciation, and tolerance of their fellow humans (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), the importance of moral virtues and values to their personal identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002), the strength of their "individualizing" (harm/care and fairness) moral intuitions (Graham & Haidt, 2008)[12] and their desire to be economically charitable towards others—as well as negatively related to their desire for undeserved social status (Wright & Reinhold, in prep).

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[11] All reported correlations significant at the $p < .01$ level.
[12] Only religious humility scores were correlated with the "binding" (authority, group membership, purity) intuitions.

Environmental humility, value of humility, and other-focus scores were positively related to people's emotional and cognitive empathy (Shaw, Baker, Baren-Cohen, & David, 2004), their capacity for forgiveness (Thompson, & Synder, 2003), and their tendency to experience guilt and desire to "make good" for wrongdoing (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011). This may be because one's capacity to empathize and feel guilt, as well as release resentment and forgo revenge, for wrongdoings is more directly related to one's feeling of connectedness to the surrounding world (both people and nature) than to one's feeling of insignificance before the splendor of the universe, or God.

With respect to the second prediction, we found that people's humility subscales were all positively correlated with their positive life-regard—specifically, the manner in which they "framed" their lives (Debats, 1990)—and their sense of having a meaningful life-purpose (Ryff, 1989). And all but their religious humility was correlated with an appreciation for the simple pleasures of life (Thompson & Synder, 2003) and positive relationships with others (Ryff, 1989).

Environmental humility, value of humility—and, less so, cosmic humility—were positively correlated with people's agentic values of self-direction and achievement, though not power, stimulation, or hedonism (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), as well as their sense of autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). While it might seem counter-intuitive for humility to be correlated with an increased sense of agency and self-direction, we think this is a reflection of something like the strong integration of agentic and community-oriented values found in moral exemplars (Walker & Frimer, 2011)—where one's sense of self-direction and accomplishment become intertwined with one's desire to meaningfully contribute to the welfare and wellbeing of

others.[13] They were also positively correlated with increased mindfulness (Neff, 2003) and secure adult attachment—as well as negatively correlated with anxious attachment (Collins & Read, 1990), and scores on the "dark triad" (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy; Jonason & Webster, 2010).

With respect to the final prediction, religious humility was positively correlated with people's intrinsic, but not extrinsic, religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967). This makes sense, given that intrinsic religiosity measures people's sincere commitment to their faith and spirituality, whereas extrinsic religiosity measures people's use of religion as a useful tool to achieve various social gains (e.g., a social network; status in one's community, etc.). People's humility was also positively related to their level of "faith maturity", both as a meaningful relationship with the divine and a commitment to being in service to others (Benson, et al., 1993).

Co-Predictors. One thing correlations cannot tell us is the degree to which self-focus and other-focus are *co-predictors* of these morally relevant capacities and indicators of psychological wellbeing—each explaining their *own portion* of the variance in people's responses, and thereby collectively explaining more variance than either would by itself. To examine this, we entered religious humility, secular humility (cosmic and environmental combined) and other-focus into regression equations with the variables discussed above.

What we found was that secular humility (i.e., self-focus) and other-focus co-predict people's scores on a wide range of attributes:[14] their commitment to

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[13] We are presently collecting data to test this hypothesis, examining whether people's level of humility predicts the degree of integration of their agentic and community values (as measured and coded using the Self-Understanding Interview; Walker & Frimer, 2011).

[14] Once again, all analyses reported had ps < .01.

humanitarian-egalitarian ideals, the degree to which they value universal principles and the wellbeing of others, the strength of their "individualizing" moral intuitions, their sense of moral integrity and moral identity—i.e., the centrality of moral values and principles to their sense of self and the goals they set for their lives.

All three measurements of humility (religious, secular, and other-focus) co-predicted people's sense of civic responsibility and their commitment to conservation of community values, heritage, and tradition.

Interactions. We also created interaction variables (secular x other-focus; religious x secular x other-focus) to examine whether their interaction independently predicted variance. Interestingly, the only place where this occurred was in faith maturity and life-regard. The interaction between people's religious, secular, and other-focus humility predicted their sense of relationship with the divine and their commitment to being in service to others, as well as the degree to which they positive (and negatively) "framed" their lives, and felt that they had meaning.

High vs. Low Humilities. One question that remained unanswered is whether there are people who are low in one dimension humility while being high in another—and whether these differences predict differences in the other attributes that matter. To answer is, we split people into "low/high" categories (0= low, 1=high) using a mean split for religious humility, secular humility, and other-focus. These were then added together, so that people low in all three would receive a 0 and people high in all three would receive a 3—with people low in some and high in others receiving numbers in between. Out of 472 adult participants, 22% were consistently (all three) high in humility and 16% were consistently low, while 62% were inconsistent. Of those, 45% were the result of a

split between religious and secular humility (i.e., self-focus)—people being high in one, but low in the other—while only 17% resulted from a split between self-focus and other-focus, suggesting that the two track one another most of the time.

People's humility ranking (0-3) predicted their score on several morally relevant attributes and indicators of psychological wellbeing—the higher their ranking, the higher (or the lower) their score. For example, humility ranking predicted people's commitment to humanitarian-egalitarian ideals, sense of civic responsibility and commitment to conservation of community values and tradition, the value of universal principles and the wellbeing of others, the strength of "individualizing" and "binding" moral intuitions, their sense of moral integrity and identity, and charitability. It also positively predicted their cognitive, social, and emotional empathy, and negatively predicted their desire for undeserved social status and economic gain. And it positively predicted their level of faith maturity, their intrinsic religiosity, and their ability to positively "frame" their lives, imbuing them with meaning (Table 1).

Humility Ranking	Hum-Egal	Civic-Res	Self-rans	Comm-Tradition	MFQ-Ind	MFQ-Bind	Moral-ID	Pos-Frame	Pos-Life-Meaning	Neg-Life-Meaning
3 low	1.32	-0.36	2.99	2.57	3.46	2.18	0.82	0.37	0.18	-0.07
1 high, 2 low	1.22	0.22	3.31	2.78	3.50	2.19	1.02	0.41	0.25	-0.12
2 high, 1 low	1.76	0.47	3.90	3.26	3.83	2.63	1.16	0.62	0.40	-0.27
3 high	2.16	1.36	4.37	3.89	4.09	3.15	1.43	0.81	0.67	-0.55

Humility Ranking	Greed-Soc-Status	Prosociality	Greed-Econ	Emp-Cog	Emp-Soc	Emp-Emot	Moral-Integ	Faith-Mat-Devine	Faith-Mat-Service	Relig-Int
3 low	-1.26	1.01	-0.87	0.84	0.64	0.41	0.64	1.32	1.05	1.29
1 high, 2 low	-1.13	1.07	-0.65	0.86	0.53	0.38	0.76	2.02	1.92	1.23
2 high, 1 low	-1.47	1.83	-1.31	1.49	1.22	0.78	1.17	3.24	3.56	2.21
3 high	-1.82	2.05	-1.48	1.30	1.20	1.12	1.63	3.67	3.67	3.74

Table 1. Differences in Moral Attributes, Psychological Wellbeing, and Religiosity by Humility Ranking

Summary of Findings. Collectively, these findings suggest that humility is a powerfully pro-social virtue, associated with a range of psychological, moral, and social benefits. They also suggest that for at least some of those capacities and attributes, low self-focus (religious, secular, or both) and high other-focus make their own contributions—often independently, but sometimes interactively.

Of particular interest is the fact that our analysis of people's low vs. high humilities (treating each facet of low self-focus and high other-focus as separate) supports our earlier suggestion about how best to think about a composite score—i.e., as representing greater or lesser *opportunities for*, or *expressions of*, humility. Having more (as opposed to fewer) opportunities to experience/express humility is related to greater expressions of other morally relevant attributes and indicators of psychological wellbeing.

Section 5: Humility as a Foundational Virtue?

Elsewhere we maintain (Wright & Nadelhoffer, in prep) that humility should be considered a "foundational" virtue, necessary—though not sufficient—for the full development of other virtues, and virtuous character more generally. Our argument for this is, roughly speaking: Being fully virtuous requires doing things in the right way at the right time for the right reasons—all of which require, among other things, the *right sort of psychological positioning of oneself* relative to all other morally significant

beings.[15] Humility, as we've defined it, provides this psychological positioning—and it is the only thing that does.[16] Therefore, humility is necessary for being fully virtuous.

It is important to note that we are not just arguing that humility is an essential virtue to have, along with other virtues, in order to be fully virtuous (i.e., in the sense of having a "full constellation" of virtues at one's disposal). Rather, the claim is a stronger one—that humility is necessary in order for the *full development* of other virtues to occur.

Consider courage. As a virtue, this usually (though not always) involves undergoing some ordeal on behalf—or for the benefit—of someone other than oneself. It seems reasonable to assume that our natural tendency to focus on ourselves, to privilege our own needs/interests over those of others, would work against such manifestations of courage, except in those instances where we it benefits us. This doesn't mean that the sort of heroism we admire in people who regularly risk their lives to save others—but, when off duty, are otherwise arrogant, self-entitled "pricks"—isn't courage, but it isn't *fully virtuous* courage, insofar as it has been enlisted into the psychological service of self-love; of inflating social egos, the need for which may indicate virtue-relevant damage to private egos.

Or consider honesty. As a general rule, honesty only becomes difficult when it puts our needs and interests at risk (or otherwise interferes with them)—and we have a hard time properly adjudicating between our own needs/interests and those of the

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[15] This encompasses both moral *agents* and moral *patients*.

[16] One might object that a person doesn't have to possess humility to achieve the right sort of psychological positioning—one can get there by just using the "impersonal force" of reason. Here, we are reminded of something Kant said in the *Groundwork*, which is that reason allows us "…to behold virtue in her proper shape", which "… is nothing other than to show morality stripped of all admixture with the sensuous and of all the spurious adornments of reward or self-love." (61-62n). Our response would be (roughly) that if we take the x-phi research coming out on ethicists (e.g., Rust & Switzgebel, 2014) seriously, it clearly shows that one's ability to reason one's way to these conclusions is not the same thing as *experiencing* them—as *occupying the world* from the position they require. To know what virtue requires is not the same thing as being virtuous or living virtuously.

individual(s) with whom we are failing to be truthful. This makes the psychological

positioning provided by humility critical for eliminating (or at least decreasing) the

temptation to privilege our needs/interests over those of others. If we view our

needs/interests as interconnected with theirs, then by harming them we harm ourselves.

It is worth noting that people's humility ranking predicted other morally relevant

attributes more frequently than indicators of psychological wellbeing, where it appears

that simply having humility at any level is sufficient. This provides at least preliminary

support for the above view. Of course, showing that as people's expression of humility

increased, so did other morally relevant attributes does not, by itself, allow us to conclude

that humility is necessary for virtue. There are other potential explanations for this

finding and for the relationship between humility and other morally relevant attributes

more generally. Clearly more theoretical and empirical work is needed.

Future Directions. If it is the case that humility is a foundational virtue, then

there are several things that we ought to expect to find, but the one that we are the most

interested in—and, thus, the direction we next hope to go—is in the presence of humility

in moral exemplars vs. moral novices. Specifically, we should expect to find that humility

is the *most stable shared attribute* across moral exemplars (who could otherwise differ

from one another along a variety of traits) and the *most stable unshared attribute* between

moral exemplars and moral novices.

It is also going to be important to study more carefully how the sort of

psychological positioning we've argued is created by humility comes about. One of the

developmental paths suggested by our research is the "being humbled" path—i.e., having

the sorts of experiences that shame us for our arrogance, forcing us out of our egocentric

center so that we catch a glimpse of the bigger picture. But how and when such experiences facilitate the shift into humility requires study. And other developmental paths are likely.

Regardless, it is clear that humility is an important virtue to study—one that has been underappreciated by ethicists and moral psychologists. We hope that our work will spark other's interests, opening up a broader interdisciplinary exploration into this foundational part of our moral lives.

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APPENDIX

FINAL SCALE STATEMENTS

Religious Humility (Low Self-Focus: Existential Awareness)

1. I often feel humble when I think of a Higher Power.
2. God requires us to be humble.
3. Ultimately, there is a Supreme Being who gets all of the credit and glory for our individual accomplishments.
4. My Creator works through me in all my good actions.
5. I accept my total dependence upon the grace of God.

Cosmic Humility (Low Self-Focus: Existential Awareness)

6. I often find myself pondering my smallness in the face of the vastness of the universe.
7. I often think about the fragility of existence.
8. I frequently think about how much bigger the universe is than our power to comprehend.
9. When I look out at the stars at night, I am often deeply humbled.
10. I feel awe towards the mysteries and complexities of life.

Environmental Humility (Low Self-Focus: Existential Awareness)

11. Humans have to learn to share the Earth with other species.
12. We should always try to be in harmony with Mother Nature.
13. I often feel in touch with Mother Nature.
14. It's important from time to time to commune with nature.
15. Caring for humanity requires us to care about the environment.

Other Focus (High Other-Focus: Extended Compassion)

16. I often place the interests of others over my own interests.
17. My friends would say I focus more on others than I do myself.
18. I always find myself making sacrifices for others.
19. My actions are often aimed towards the wellbeing of others.
20. I care about the welfare others, at times more than my own welfare.

Valuing Humility (Indirect Measure of Humility)

21. Humility is a virtue.
22. I find humble people to be very admirable.
23. A good dose of humble pie is often necessary.
24. Teaching kids the value of humility is very important to their development.
25. It's important to always keep one's accomplishments in perspective.