

Paper Title: Some Varieties of Humility Worth Wanting

Authors: Thomas Nadelhoffer, Jen Cole Wright, Matthew Echols, Tyler Perini, and Kelly Venezia

Abstract:

In this paper we first set the stage with a brief overview of the tangled history of humility in theology and philosophy—beginning with its treatment in the Bible and ending with the more recent work that has been done in contemporary philosophy (§§1-2). Our two-fold goal at this early stage of the paper is to explore some of the different accounts of humility that have traditionally been developed and to highlight some of the key debates in the current literature. Next, we present the findings from several studies we recently conducted in an effort to explore people’s intuitions and beliefs about humility as well as their experiences with being humble (or failing to be humble) (§3). Finally, we discuss the relevance of our findings to the ongoing philosophical debates about humility—suggesting that while some varieties of humility are problematic, other varieties of humility are certainly worth wanting (§4).

Keywords:

Humility, Virtue, Ethics, Moral Psychology

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Introduction

Humility is perhaps the oddest of the traditional moral virtues. If dictionaries are to be trusted—and perhaps they shouldn't be, as we'll see—humility involves “having a modest or low view of one's importance” (Oxford Dictionary) in addition to being “not proud or haughty,” “not arrogant or assertive,” “reflecting, expressing, or offered in a spirit of deference or submission,” and even “ranking low in a hierarchy scale” (Merriam-Webster). As such, humility seems to be an important antidote to pride and hubris, yet also troubling from the standpoints of morality and positive psychology. Do we really want to count as a virtue a trait that recommends low self-esteem and submissive deference?

In addition to being both morally and psychologically problematic, certain conceptions of humility are also worrisome from the standpoint of epistemology. Consider, for instance, Martin Luther's suggestion that, “true humility, therefore never knows that it is humble...for if it knew this, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue” (p. 375).¹ A similar view was expressed by St. Teresa of Avila, who claimed that traits such as humility and detachment “have the property of hiding themselves from one who possesses them” so that one neither sees them

¹ M. Luther, *Martin Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. by J. Pelikan. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956).

nor believes one has them (p. 43).² If being humble requires us to be blind to our own humility as Luther, St. Teresa, and others suggest, it would seem to require its possessor to be ignorant, self-deceived, or some combination of the two—epistemic traits that are not often associated with virtue.

Given the somewhat paradoxical nature of humility, it is perhaps unsurprising that philosophers disagree when it comes to its normative status. For some philosophers, humility is the proper attitudinal stance to adopt when it comes to one's subsidiary relationship to God (or nature or even to other people)—a virtue that is purportedly “central to human life” (p. 226).³ However, philosophers ranging from Spinoza to Sidgwick have adopted a markedly more critical stance towards humility. On this more negative view, to the extent that St. Aquinas and other theologians are right that being humble involves “self-abasement to the lowest place” (*ST*, II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 2),⁴ humility is a trait that ought to be criticized rather than exalted.

As a result, the parties to the debate about the nature and value of humility find themselves at a dialectical stalemate. As is the case with many disagreements, where one ends up in this debate will depend in part on where one starts. Here as elsewhere, the initial definitions we adopt tend to drive our normative conclusions. If we simply define humility innocuously in terms of having “an inclination to keep one's accomplishments, traits, abilities, etc., in perspective” (p. 256),⁵ being humble seems virtuous. If we define humility instead in terms of self-abasement and self-degradation, then being humble looks more like a vice. But which definition should we adopt?

² St. Teresa of Avila, ‘Way of Perfection’, in E. Allison Peers (ed. and trans.) *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1972), chap. 10.

³ N. Wirzba, ‘The Touch of Humility: An Invitation to Creatureliness’, *Modern Theology* 24(2) (2008), pp. 225-244.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 44, trans. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge, UK: Blackfriars, [1485] 1972).

⁵ N. Richards, ‘Is Humility a Virtue?’ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25:3 (1988), pp. 253-259.

Henry Sidgwick once argued that one of the primary goals of ethical theorizing is to “make explicit the implied premises of our common moral reasoning” (p. 163).⁶ Because we largely agree with Sidgwick’s approach, our present focus will be on the view of humility that is embedded in ordinary language. By examining people’s pre-theoretical judgments, attitudes, and beliefs about humility (and related concepts), we can gain insight into how people ordinarily think about humility. And while empirical data about common sense morality admittedly will not straightaway *solve* the disputes surrounding the nature and value of humility, we nevertheless believe that these data ought to *inform* (and perhaps even *constrain*) our philosophical theorizing.

But before we discuss the results of our empirical efforts, we first set the stage with a brief overview of the tangled history of humility—beginning with its treatment in the Old and New Testaments and ending with the more recent work that has been done in contemporary philosophy (§§1-2). Our two-fold goal at this early stage is to explore some of the different accounts of humility that have traditionally been put forward by theologians and philosophers and to highlight some of the key debates in the current literature. Next, we present the findings from several studies we recently conducted in an effort to explore people’s intuitions and beliefs about humility as well as their experiences with being humble (or failing to be humble) (§3). Finally, we discuss the relevance of our findings to the ongoing philosophical debates about the nature and value of humility—suggesting that while some varieties of humility are morally problematic, there are other varieties of humility that are certainly worth wanting (§4).

1. Humility from Antiquity to the 20th Century

One issue that arises in the literature on humility is whether it is a character trait that has its own set of positive features or whether it is simply the absence of negative character traits such as pride, arrogance, haughtiness, hubris, and the like—in other words, whether people can be

⁶ H. Sidgwick, *The Method of Ethics*, ed. J. Bennett (www.earlymoderntexts.com, [1874] 2011).

meaningfully said to *possess* humility or simply *lack* various negative traits. As we saw earlier, humility is often defined in dictionaries in terms of what it *isn't* rather than in terms of what it *is*. Perhaps this is due to the family of related concepts that have historically been associated with the religious conception of humility. In the Old Testament, for instance, pride and arrogance are often picked out as chief vices to be avoided. So, we are told that, “the Lord will destroy the house of the proud” (Proverbs 15: 25), that “pride is the tillage of the wicked” (21: 4), and that “everyone who is arrogant is an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 16: 5-6).

These types of passages make it clear that the proud and high-minded will be punished for adopting an inflated and self-important attitude. Being sufficiently low-minded, on the other hand, 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 being important in the eyes of God. So, we are told that, “the common man will be humbled and the man of importance abased” (Isaiah 5:15). The act of being humbled is often lauded in the Old Testament as a kind of antidote or cure for pride and arrogance—vices that merit God's condemnation and even wrath.

This conception of the nature and value of humility carries over into the New Testament where the act of being humbled is once again presented as a pathway to salvation. We're told that Jesus Christ made the following remarks: “Truly, as I say to you, unless you turn and become as children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself like a child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 18: 3-4). In light of its treatment in the Old and New Testaments, it is unsurprising that humility is viewed by some as a

cornerstone of Christian spirituality.⁷ On this view, humility is a virtue that both does and should play an essential role in our moral and spiritual lives.

However, there are elements of this traditional religious conception of humility that have led philosophers to question its status as a virtue. For instance, as we have already seen, humility has been associated with having a low opinion not only of one's accomplishments but also of one's self-worth. For present purposes, we're going to 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. Not only are we to "reckon others as better than ourselves" (Philippians 2:3), but we are also supposed to emulate Christ, "who made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave" (Philippians 2: 7-8).

This way of understanding religious humility was taken to its extreme during the Middle Ages—a historical twist that set the stage for hundreds of years of subsequent debate about the nature and value of humility. Consider the following 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 in the 12th century (p. 48).⁸
- "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* in the 14th Century (p.181).⁹

⁷ Some have even claimed that humility "was a quintessentially Christian discovery." See, e.g., K. Konkola, 'Have We Lost Humility?' *Humanitas*, 28:1-2 (2005) pp. 185-207.

⁸ Maimonides (Moses Ben Maimom), *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. I. Twersky, (New York: Behrman House, 1972).

⁹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. James Walsh (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1981), chap. 32.

- “It is not all that are clothed in sackcloth, but to the humble soul that God has respect: even to the self-abhorring person, who judges himself unworthy to come among the people of God...that patiently suffer the injuries of enemies and friends, and heartily forgive and love them; that bear the most sharp and plain reproofs with gentleness and thanks; that think the lowest place in men’s esteem, affections, and respects, the fittest for them.” ~Richard Baxter in the 19th century (p. 51)¹⁰

According to this patchwork of related views, not only does humility require us to have a low-minded attitude towards our accomplishments and self-worth, but it also requires active self-abasement (and perhaps even self-loathing). For instance, in his “Letter to All the Faithful,” St. Francis of Assisi makes the following related remarks: “we ought rather to be simple, humble, and pure. And let us hold our bodies in dishonor and contempt because through our fault we are all wretched and corrupt, foul and worms” (p. 103).¹¹

This more extreme version of religious humility eventually came to draw the critical glance of some philosophers. For, it is one thing to insist that humble individuals must be down to earth, have low self-focus, keep their accomplishments in perspective, etc. It is another thing to insist that the humble also take themselves to deserve to be trodden upon, like “dust in the street” (p. 34).¹² If humility really does require “self-abasement to the lowest place” (*ST*, II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 2)¹³ as St. Aquinas and others have suggested, then it becomes difficult to see how humility could be a virtue—especially when a certain degree of self-worth and self-esteem are now viewed as important aspects of our health and happiness. Given the historical

¹⁰ R. Baxter ‘Christian Directory’, in W. Orme (ed.), *The Practical Works of The Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830).

¹¹ St. Francis of Assisi, *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Paschal Robinson, [1905], at sacred-texts.com, pp. 96-108.

¹² T.A. Kempis, *T.A. Of the Imitation of Christ*, trans. A. Croft & H. Bolton (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, [1441]1940).

¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.

association between humility and feelings and attitudes involving humiliation, self-degradation, shame, and the like—and the view of the humble person as someone “who accepts his lowly position as *due him*” (p. 17, emphasis added)¹⁴—then it is no wonder that humility began falling out of philosophical fashion, especially in the wake of the Enlightenment.

Baruch Spinoza was one of the first modern philosophers to claim outright that “humility is not a virtue” (E4. Prop. 53)¹⁵. Instead, Spinoza associates humility with the kind of unhealthy self-abasement we discussed earlier in this section—that is, “thinking too meanly of oneself” (E3. DOE 29).¹⁶ Another modern philosopher who cast a skeptical eye toward humility was David Hume. On his view, “monkish virtues” such as “celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, [and] solitude” (p. 108)¹⁷ tended to “stupefy the understanding and harden the heart; obscure the fancy, and sour the temper” (p. 108).¹⁸ Moreover, Hume claimed that these monkish virtues “serve no manner of purpose; neither advance a man’s fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment” (p. 108).¹⁹

While Hume’s criticism of humility was based partly on its purported disutility, Friedrich Nietzsche later criticized humility on different grounds, viewing it through the lens of his genealogical account of the so-called “slave revolt in morality” (p. 19).²⁰ On this view, the “noble man” is a high-minded individual who is keenly aware of his own excellence and for whom “proud states of the soul are experienced as conferring distinction and determining the

¹⁴ G. Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹⁵ B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, [1677] 1955).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (La Salle, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, [1777]1960).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. For more on Hume’s views concerning humility, see W. Davie, ‘Hume on Monkish Virtue’, *Hume Studies* 25:1-2 (1999), pp. 139-154.

²⁰ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. M. Clark & J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, [1887]1998).

order of rank” (p. 204).²¹ While Nietzsche associated pride with the aristocratic elite, he associated humility instead with “the cowardly, the anxious, the petty...the suspicious, with their unfree glances, those who humble themselves, the dog-like people who allow themselves to be maltreated, the begging flatterers, above all the liars” (p. 205).²²

Henry Sidgwick was yet another philosopher in the late 19th century who was critical of humility. And while he didn’t treat humility as harshly (or hyperbolically) as Nietzsche, Sidgwick nevertheless suggested that it often receives “unqualified praise, in spite of what a man may lose by underrating his own abilities” (p. 160).²³ Echoing the instrumentalist objections to humility that had been voiced earlier by Hume, Sidgwick faulted humility for being both “paradoxical” and “irrational” insofar as it requires people to have distorted views of their own accomplishments and value (p. 161).²⁴

One strategy that has recently been adopted to salvage humility’s status as a virtue is to try to “remove the negative baggage from the traditional conception of religious humility” to see if anything valuable remains (p. 235).²⁵ Whether this is a fruitful enterprise is itself one of the ongoing debates about humility. If humility can be conceptualized in ways that eschew the low-mindedness and self-abasement we’ve discussed in this section, then perhaps more can be said in defense of treating humility as a virtue. If not, then perhaps Spinoza, Hume, Nietzsche, Sidgwick, and others were right to hold humility itself in low regard. The goal of the following section is to discuss these and related issues that arise in the contemporary philosophical literature on humility.

²¹ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, [1886]1966).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ H. Sidgwick, *The Method of Ethics*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ S. Hare, ‘The Paradox of Moral Humility’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33:2 (1996): pp. 235-241.

2. *Contemporary Philosophy and Humility*

As we saw in the previous section, there are some unsettling elements associated with the traditional religious conception of humility that explain why some philosophers have suggested that humility threatens to be “at best a saving grace for the mediocre and at worst an excuse for passivity towards human wrongs” (p. 235).²⁶ One of the driving forces behind people’s unease about humility is the (we believe mistaken) assumption that being humble requires us to undervalue (even loathe) ourselves and underestimate our own capabilities. A similar worry arises in the contemporary literature on the epistemology of modesty.²⁷ For instance, according to one prominent account, “The modest person underestimates his self-worth to some limited degree...[and] is ignorant to a certain degree of his self-worth...A modest person could still have a rather high opinion of herself, just not as high as she is entitled to have” (pp. 18-19).²⁸ Unsurprisingly, not all philosophers agree that modesty requires ignorance, however limited this ignorance might be).²⁹

For present purposes, exploring the ongoing debate about the nature of modesty (and whether it requires epistemic accuracy or inaccuracy) would take us too far afield. Instead, we simply want to consider the prospect of adopting a similar “underestimation view” of humility—

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ In the recent philosophical literature on modesty, philosophers are divided about the relationship between modesty and humility. Some explicitly treat “modesty” and “humility” as interchangeable. See, e.g., S. Hare, ‘The Paradox of Moral Humility’, p.240 and G.A. Sinha, ‘Modernizing the Virtue of Humility’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90:2 (2011), pp. 259-274. Others think a clear distinction can be drawn between the two traits—e.g., F. Allhoff, ‘What Is Modesty?’ *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23 (2010), pp.165-187. Still others talk about modesty without taking a stand about its relationship to humility—e.g., J. Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and O. Flanagan, ‘Virtue and Ignorance’, *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 420-428. Our empirical work done elsewhere suggests that while humility is related to modesty, the two are distinct. See, e.g., J.C. Wright, T. Nadelhoffer, L. Ross, & W. Sinnott-Armstrong, ‘Be It Ever So Humble: An Updated Account and Scale for Humility’, in preparation at College of Charleston.

²⁸ J. Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*.

²⁹ See, e.g., F. Allhoff, ‘What Is Modesty?’ J. Driver, ‘The Virtues of Ignorance’, *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): pp. 373-84, J. Driver, ‘Modesty and Ignorance.’ *Ethics* 109:4 (1999), pp. 827-834, O. Flanagan, ‘Virtue and Ignorance’, A.T. Nuyen, ‘Just Modesty’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998), pp. 101-109, G.F. Schueler, ‘Why Modesty Is a Virtue’, *Ethics* 107 (1997), pp. 467-485, and G.F. Schueler, ‘Why IS Modesty a Virtue?’ *Ethics* 109:4 (1999), pp. 835-41.

which would perhaps enable us to conceptualize humility in a way that decouples it from self-abasement, self-denigration, and the like. On this more moderate view, being humble merely requires us to underestimate the value of our accomplishments and our self-worth. It doesn't require us to view ourselves as inherently wretched, vile, and corrupt.

Keep in mind that the theologians we discussed in the last section who adopt the self-abasement view thought that we are *epistemically accurate* in holding ourselves (and our accomplishments) in the lowest possible regard. Consider, for instance, the following remarks by St. Aquinas, “it is possible, without falsehood, to deem and avow oneself the most despicable of men ... [and] without falsehood one may avow and believe oneself in all ways unprofitable and useless in respect of one's own capability” (ST II-II Q. 161 Art. 6 ad.1).³⁰ Of course, whether one agrees that St. Aquinas and other advocates of the self-abasement view are right concerning the alleged epistemic accuracy involved in thinking of ourselves as despicable will depend on one's background metaphysics. For those who don't share certain religious beliefs with these thinkers (e.g., Original sin), the claims that we are all corrupt, worthless, and vile will seem quite inaccurate indeed. That said, for present purposes, the key point is that the advocates of the self-abasement view believe that humility requires us to have accurate beliefs about ourselves (including beliefs about our lowly and debased status, etc.)—deciding whether they're right about what accuracy involves on this front is a task for another day.

For now, we want to focus on the differences between the self-abasement and underestimation views. According to proponents of the latter, being humble does not require us to view ourselves as wretched, corrupt, or deserving of abuse. Rather the underestimation view merely requires us to esteem ourselves and our accomplishments less than is merited (even if only slightly less). While this view of humility is less extreme (and hence less problematic) than

³⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.

the self-abasement view, it nevertheless introduces a new problem—namely, it requires people to be out of touch with their own knowledge, skills, accomplishments and aptitudes. So, while some philosophers embrace these kinds of so-called “virtues of ignorance”³¹ in other contexts, we aren’t completely satisfied with this approach to humility. In our eyes, if a trait (or disposition) requires ignorance, self-deception, or some combination of the two, this problematizes it as a virtuous trait (or disposition). As such, while we find the underestimation view of humility more promising than the self-abasement view, it is not without problems of its own. What we want is a view of humility that allows for (but may not require) epistemic accuracy that doesn’t at the same time commit us to any metaphysical views about our inherent lowliness.

In order to sidestep some of the metaphysical and epistemological problems associated with both the self-abasement and underestimation views, one could instead adopt a conception of humility whereby the genuinely humble person can have a perfectly accurate appreciation for her own value, skills, and abilities—she just doesn’t give it much thought or grant it much importance.³² 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” (p. 256).³³ In other words, humility does not require us to hold ourselves in low regard, but rather it merely requires us not to be *enamored with* ourselves. Like previous views, this account involves a “reduction” of the self—but here it involves a “decentering” rather than a “decreasing”. We cease to experience ourselves as centers of our own universe, recognizing that there is more out there to think about, and to *care* about, than ourselves.

³¹ J. Driver, ‘The Virtues of Ignorance’.

³² For present purposes, we will remain neutral when it comes to whether epistemic accuracy is *necessary* for humility. It’s enough that humility thusly defined is *compatible* with an accurate understanding of one’s values, worth, and accomplishments. In this way, our view is still distinct from the underestimation view—which *requires* epistemic inaccuracy. That said, it is also worth pointing out that on our view, epistemic accuracy is not sufficient for humility either.

³³ N. Richards, 1988. Is Humility a Virtue? *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 25:3 (1988), pp. 253-259. See also N. Snow, ‘Humility’, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 29 (1995), pp. 203-216.

On this view, being humble doesn't require us to hold ourselves in low regard (or in a lower regard than is merited). Instead, humility merely requires us to avoid thinking too highly of ourselves.³⁴ The chief virtue of this conception of humility is that one need not be self-deprecating, ignorant, or self-deceived, in order to be humble. Moreover, humility thusly defined is also perfectly consistent with self-esteem and self-worth. Because humility merely requires the absence of self-importance and the ability to keep one's ego in check, being humble requires neither self-deception nor self-abasement. As such, it is easier to see how humility could be a virtue.

As C.S. Lewis (2012) wrote, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less",³⁵ implying that humility is not about *how* we think, but rather *how much* we think, about ourselves. The focus shifts outward—towards the needs and wellbeing of others. So conceived, humility would likely involve "hypo-egoic" states—such as those described in moments of flow and de-individuation—when people are fully occupied with activities, or transcendence, when we feel connected to something larger.³⁶ Such states involve a "quieting" of the self, resulting in a shift of awareness *away* from oneself, *towards* other things,³⁷ increased self-regulation,³⁸ and optimal functioning and well-being.³⁹

³⁴ This view also has a corollary in the literature on modesty Allhoff (2010); Flanagan (1990); Nuyen (1998); Schueler (1997); (1999).

³⁵ Lewis, C. S. (Source: thesecertainthings) September 2012 3:09 pm 20 notes

<http://thesecertainthings.tumblr.com/post/31873965746/humility-is-not-thinking-less-of-yourself-but>

³⁶ M.R. Leary, C.E. Adams, & E.B. Tate, 'Hypo-egoic Self-regulation: Exercising Self Control by Diminishing the Influence of the Self', *Journal of Personality* 74:6 (2006), pp. 1803-1832.

³⁷ M.R. Leary & M.L. Terry, 'Hypo-egoic Mindsets: Antecedents and Implications of Quieting the Self', in M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (eds.) *Handbook of Self and Identity*, 2nd edn (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), pp. 268-288.

³⁸ M.R. Leary, C.E. Adams, & E.B. Tate, 'Hypo-egoic Self-regulation: Exercising Self Control by Diminishing the Influence of the Self'.

³⁹ M.R. Leary & J. Guadagno, 'The Role of Hypo-egoic Self-processes in Optimal Functioning and Subjective Well-being', in K. M. Sheldon, T. B. Kashdan, M. F. Steger (eds.), *Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 135-146.

It is arguably something like this conception of humility that motivated Tangney (2000) to identify humility as an accurate assessment of one's talents and achievements, and the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations, along with an openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice, and a general appreciation of the value of other people and things.⁴⁰ Others have defined humility along similar lines—such as having a moderate or accurate view of oneself,⁴¹ often accompanied by a relative lack of self-preoccupation⁴² or desire to distort information, or otherwise “self-enhance” or make oneself look and feel better,⁴³ as well as an open-minded willingness to admit mistakes, seek new information, and a general desire to learn.⁴⁴

For those who adopt this positive conception of humility, being humble is not a function of being out of touch with one's accomplishments and self-worth, but rather of being “decentered” when it comes to the self, with one's focus being shifted *away* from oneself and *towards* one's duties and obligations to others. On this view, the key characteristics of the humble person are simultaneously low *self-focus* and high *other-focus*. These two intrapersonal and interpersonal elements of humility are intimately connected. As Snow (1995) points out, “to

⁴⁰ J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility: Theoretical Perspectives, Empirical Findings and Directions for Future Research’, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19:1 (2000), pp. 70-82.

⁴¹ See, e.g., R.F. Baumeister & J.J. Exline, ‘Mystical Self-loss: A Challenge for Psychological Theory’, *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 12 (2002), pp. 15-20, R.A. Emmons, ‘Religion in the Psychology of Personality: An Introduction’, *Journal of Personality* 67 (1999), pp. 873-888, W.C. Rowatt, A. Ottenbreit, K.J. Nesselroade, & P.A. Cunningham, ‘On Being Holier-Than-Thou or Humbler-Than-Thee: A Social-psychological Perspective on Religiousness and Humility’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:2 (2002), pp. 227-237, S.J. Sandage, T.W. Wiens, & C.M. Dahl, ‘Humility and Attention: The Contemplative Psychology of Simone Weil’, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 20:4 (2001), pp. 360-369, J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility’, in S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 483-490.

⁴² See, e.g., J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility: Theoretical Perspectives, Empirical Findings and Directions for Future Research’, J.M. Templeton, *Worldwide Laws of Life: 200 Eternal Spiritual Principles*. (Radner, PA: Templeton Press, 1997).

⁴³ See, e.g., C. Peterson & M.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. (New York: American Psychological Association, 2004).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., C. Hwang, ‘Studies in Chinese Personality: A Critical Review’, *Bulletin of Educational Psychology* 15 (1982), pp. 227-242, J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility: Theoretical Perspectives, Empirical Findings and Directions for Future Research’, J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility’, J.M. Templeton, *Worldwide Laws of Life: 200 Eternal Spiritual Principles*.

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*.” (p. 210) [emphasis added].⁴⁵ 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).⁴⁶

For present purposes, there are two noteworthy features of this type of “decentered and devoted” view of humility. First, this view is less problematic than the conceptions of humility we discussed in the previous section. Second, the emphasis on low self-focus (“decentered”) and high other-focus (“devoted”) that is the hallmark of this view of humility can be cashed out in purely secular terms. For while one might focus on the needs and interests of others out of a sense of religious obligation, that need not be the case—that is, there is a secular analog to this view of humility. So, for those, like us, who are interested in removing some of the problematic metaphysical and epistemological baggage from the traditional conceptions of humility, the decentered and devoted view is a good place to start.

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, indeed, 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 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 by being mindful of one’s place in “the larger scheme of things.” So, while Gerber

⁴⁵ N. Snow, ‘Humility’.

⁴⁶ Some readers may worry about including high-other focus as a part of humility rather than treating it something related to but distinct from humility. We will provide empirical evidence in Section 3 that allays these concerns.

(2002) claims that “humility stems from a person’s relationship with something greater” (p. 43),⁴⁷ 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).⁴⁸

Given the features of this transcendental or cosmic viewpoint, it is no wonder that some philosophers have suggested that humility is also important when it comes to fostering an appropriate attitude towards nature and the environment. As Hill (1983) suggests, “awareness of nature typically has and should have a humbling effect. The Alps, a storm at sea, the Grand Canyon, towering redwoods, and the ‘starry heavens’ move many a person to remark on the comparative insignificance of our daily concerns and even of our species and this is generally taken to be a quite fitting response” (p. 219).⁴⁹ To exemplify this type of humility, one need not view oneself as lowly, meaningless, or undeserving. One need only view oneself as but one small part of a larger interconnected whole.

People who are humble in this respect (which we’re going to call “existential awareness”) are less likely to be unduly impressed with their own skills, talents, and accomplishments. They are able to keep both their successes and their failures in proper perspective and able to appreciate the role that luck often plays in how their lives unfold. It is in this way that humility is opposed to self-importance and arrogance. Someone who is existentially aware wouldn’t at the same time tend to possess these antonymous traits. Moreover, avoiding these negative traits doesn’t require any unwarranted feelings of lowliness or self-abasement. Existential awareness merely requires that one realizes and acknowledges that one is no better than others in the larger

⁴⁷ L. Gerber, ‘Standing Humbly Before Nature’, *Ethics & the Environment* 7:1 (2002): pp. 39-53.

⁴⁸ N. Snow, ‘Humility’.

⁴⁹ T. Hill, ‘Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments’, *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983) pp. 211-224.

scheme of things—especially those who are less fortunate than oneself. This explains why traits such as being down-to-earth and modesty are often treated as synonymous with humility—namely, these are traits that we both do and should expect a humble person to possess.

Having said a few words about the low self-focus component of the decentered and devoted view, we'd like to say something about the other element as well—namely, high other-focus. For starters, humility thusly conceived doesn't require one to be a moral saint or to reduce oneself to marginal utility in order to help those in need (although being humble in this sense is presumably compatible with these arguably supererogatory attitudes and behaviors). While these may well be laudable, we don't think humility requires this type of extreme devotion to others. It merely requires one to be mindful, attentive, considerate, and charitable towards others—especially those who may need help or assistance or who are in harm's way. The humble person is someone who takes an active interest in the lives of others and seeks to make a difference when 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 in the world.

In this way, high other-focus—that is, our devotion to the interest and well-being of others—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 yet purposeless universe. By turning her attention to the lives and interests of others, the humble person becomes grounded in a way that staves off existential anxiety. That's why the humble person exhibits both low self-focus and high-other focus. To have one without the other

is to be either a solipsist or an egotist—neither of which is compatible with humility. Being humble strikes a middle ground between these extremes.

Because humility facilitates a realistic appraisal of ourselves, it removes (or reduces) the need to *inflate* or *deflate* our own value or significance. This in turn makes it less likely that we will unnecessarily inflate or deflate our estimation of other people's value or significance. And it is this “unencumbered” encountering of others as individuals in their own right that (a) facilitates an appreciation of and compassion for their welfare, and (b) increases our attention on (and interest in) its protection and promotion.⁵⁰ It is for these and related reasons that the 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.

At this point, let's pause to take stock concerning what we've discussed in the past two sections. On the one hand, there are some varieties of humility that are problematic from the standpoints of morality, positive psychology, and epistemology—e.g., the self-abasement and underestimation views. On the other hand, there are other varieties of humility that seem to be laudable. For instance, the decentered and devoted view that we sketched above is compatible with both self-esteem and self-understanding—two important traits that cannot be easily accommodated by other accounts of humility. Given that theologians and philosophers have disagreed when it comes to which of these varieties of humility is *real* humility, it is unsurprising that they have disagreed when it comes to the nature and value of humility. As we mentioned in the introduction, where one starts one's investigation, definitionally speaking, will often determine where one ends up. So, one of the key issues when it comes to the on-going debate

⁵⁰ J.P. LaBouff, W.C. Rowatt, M.K. Johnson, J. Tsang, & G.M. Willerton, 'Humble Persons Are More Helpful than Less Humble Persons: Evidence from Three Studies', *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 7 (2012), pp. 16-29.

about humility is where we should begin—that is, which varieties of humility should we embrace and which should we eschew?

Before we provide our own preferred answer to this question—which will be the topic of §4—we first want to discuss our attempt to shed light on how people ordinarily think about the nature and value of humility. On our view, data about humility and commonsense morality are relevant for the purposes of philosophical theorizing. Views of humility which agree with folk intuitions have defeasible *prima facie* support while views of humility which conflict with commonsense morality have the dialectical burden of proof. As we will see in the following section, our findings suggest that the varieties of humility we take to be worth wanting (something roughly along the lines of the decentered and devoted view) are already embedded in how people ordinarily think and talk about humility.

3. The Folk Concept of Humility: Some New Findings

In the previous two sections, we explored a number of different views concerning the nature and value of humility. From the more problematic self-abasement and underestimation views to the more promising views that focused instead on existential awareness and the importance of service to others, we found that different theologians and philosophers have focused on a variety of sometimes competing conceptions of humility. Our goal in this section is to present the results of our efforts to shed light on how laypersons ordinarily think about humility. Given the tangled history of humility, we wanted to explore people's beliefs and intuitions in a wide variety of ways. In this section, we provide an overview of our findings. First, we discuss our attempts to construct and validate a new psychometric tool for measuring dispositional humility. Second, we discuss our attempts to explore the folk concept of humility in both adolescents and adults.

Finally, we discuss our investigation of people's reports concerning their personal experiences when it comes to exhibiting (or failing to exhibit) humility.

3.1. The Humility Scale

In the first study, our goal was to develop and validate a scale for measuring humility. And while we won't be discussing the results of this study in great detail here, we nevertheless think it would be helpful to provide a brief overview of what we did and what we found.⁵¹ For the development of the humility scale, we started by compiling statements for people to respond to that encompassed everything we could think of having to do with or related to humility. Specifically, we created statements to capture each of the views of humility discussed above, as well as positively and negatively related constructs such as open-mindedness, tolerance, public vs. personal modesty, arrogance, entitlement, and moral flexibility vs. steadfastness. Here are some examples:

- I am no better than anyone else.
- I tend to look out for myself more than take care of others. (Reversed)
- I often find myself pondering my smallness in the face of the vastness of the universe.
- In relation to God's glory, I am really nothing.
- I think it is important to put people in their proper place.
- I try to always pay attention to other people's interests.
- I always try hard to keep things in perspective.

Participants responded to each of these statements on a 7-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). Through several rounds of data collection and analysis (involving over 2,000

⁵¹ For complete details concerning The Humility Scale, see J.C. Wright, T. Nadelhoffer, L. Ross, & W. Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Be It Ever So Humble: An Updated Account and Scale for Humility'.

participants), we honed this massive set (210 items) down to a scale containing 25 items with five different sub-scales (5 items each). What emerged from the data was one clear construct of humility that was composed of *existential awareness* (which broke down into distinct religious, cosmic, and environmental sub-scales) and *devotion to others*, along with an indirect measure of people's attitudes about the *value of humility*.

In other words, participants appeared to view the “core” of humility to be low self-focus and high other-focus. Due to low factor loadings and poor correlations, none of the more negative aspects of humility remained in the scale (our most negative item being “A good dose of humble pie is often necessary”). In addition, all of the other constructs we had included (open-mindedness, tolerance, public vs. personal modesty, arrogance, entitlement, and moral flexibility vs. steadfastness) were revealed to be distinct from—though related to—the humility items.⁵²

Of course, it is important not to read too much about the nature of humility into this—the scale construction and analysis only tells us which items “hang together” as a coherent construct, and which do not. Or, more precisely, it tells us which responses (which are assumed to be representative of people's actual attitudes) about the various items are sufficiently inter-correlated to warrant the conclusion that they are attitudes about the same *thing*. That said, we did not directly ask people whether they considered the thing that we were measuring to be *humility*. And more importantly, scales are designed to measure the degree to which people possess or express a particular construct or trait (in this case, humility). Thus, they do not reveal anything directly about the concept of humility itself. In order to examine more closely (and more directly) people's actual “folk concept” of humility, we conducted a second study.

⁵² It is worth mentioning that we tried to avoid worries surrounding self-report measures for humility in two ways: First, we tried to get at the construct of humility indirectly (by using mostly items that do not mention humility). Second, we administered a social desirability scale that we used to eliminate items that correlated too strongly with scores from the Social Desirability Scale (see R. Ballard, ‘Short Forms of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale’, *Psychological Reports* 71 (1992), pp. 1155-1160.)

3.2 The Folk Concept of Humility

This study was conducted with both an adult and an adolescent sample. For the adult sample, we had 199 participants (56% male; 77% Caucasian, 8% Asian-American, 10% African-American, 5% Hispanic) who filled out a survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk.⁵³ They were paid \$1.00 for their participation. For the adolescent sample, we had 131 5-8th graders (40 5th graders, 28 6th graders, 39 7th graders, 24 8th graders) attending a local private school. Of these, 55% were male and they were almost entirely Caucasian.

The adult participants were divided into two groups: the “humility condition” (107 participants) and the “lacking humility” (92 participants) condition. They were all instructed to “Take a moment to reflect on the virtue of humility”.⁵⁴

Participants in the first group were instructed to respond (in writing) to the following questions:

- *Folk Concept: What do you think a person who [fully] possesses the virtue of humility is like? Please describe such a person with as much detail as you can.*
- *Experiences: Please reflect on a moment in your life where you felt like you exhibited the virtue of humility. Please write a paragraph telling us about what happened and how you felt.*

Participants in the second group were instructed to answer the following questions:

- *Folk Concept: What do you think a person who [completely] lacks the virtue of humility is like? Please describe such a person with as much detail as you can.*

⁵³ For a review of the reliability of data collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk, see M. Buhrmester, T. Kwang, and S.D. Gosling, ‘Amazon’s Mechanical Turk: A New Source of Inexpensive, yet High-quality, Data?’ *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6:1 (2011), pp. 3-5.

⁵⁴ Some readers may object that we have begged the question against those who suggest that humility is not a virtue by specifically asking participants to reflect on the virtue of humility. We say more about this in Section 4.

- *Experiences:* Please reflect on a moment in your life where you felt like you failed to exhibit the virtue of humility. Please write a paragraph telling us about what happened and how you felt.

Once the adult participants completed this first part of the study, they were presented with the Humility Scale and asked to provide some basic demographic information.

The adolescent participants, on the other hand, were asked to respond (in writing) to the following question about their folk concept of humility: *What do you think humility is, and what is someone who has a lot of humility is like?*

Note that we did not ask them to consider the opposite—i.e., someone lacking the trait of humility. Once they completed this question, they were asked some other (unrelated) questions and asked to fill out a few surveys, one of which was an abbreviated version of the Humility Scale.

3.2.1 1st Stage of Folk Concept Coding: Low Self-Focus/High Other-Focus

For the first stage of coding, we wanted to establish the frequency with which people's folk concepts of humility (and, for the adult sample, the lack of humility) referenced one or both of the two dimensions that were present in the scale: *existential awareness* (low self-focus) and *devotion to the lives and interests of others* (high other-focus). To do this, participants' written entries were read and coded by two independent coders for both instances of low self-focus and high other-focus.⁵⁵

These were operationally defined in the following ways:

- *Low self-focus:* (1st aspect) reference to an awareness of being part of something larger, bigger than oneself—of being just one among others that are equal to oneself;

⁵⁵ The reliability between the two coders was 87% for low self-focus and 93% for high self-focus.

(2nd aspect) reference to a lack of desire to self-aggrandize or self-promote; a modesty in self-presentation and/or life-style.

- *High other-focus*: (1st aspect) reference to the recognition of the value of others, openness to new ideas, values, belief-systems, etc.; (2nd aspect) reference to a desire to help others, placing others' needs above one's own, kindness and compassion.

Adult Data. For the participants that received the “humble” condition, we found that 89% of the 107 participants made reference to one or both aspects of low self-focus. Of that, 16% made reference only to the 1st aspect, 53% made reference only to the 2nd aspect, and 20% made reference to both. We also found that 62% of the 107 participants made reference to one or both aspects of high other-focus. Of that, 5% made reference only to the 1st aspect, 50% made reference only to the 2nd aspect, and 7% made reference to both.

For the adult participants that received the “not humble” condition, we found that 95% of the 92 participants made reference to *the lack of* one or both aspect of low self-focus. Of that, 10% made reference only to the 1st aspect, 59% made reference only to the 2nd aspect, and 26% made reference to both. We also found that 52% of the 92 participants made reference to *the lack of* one or both aspects of high other-focus. Of that, 5% made reference only to the 1st aspect, 41% made reference only to the 2nd aspect, and 7% made reference to both (Figs. 1 and 2).

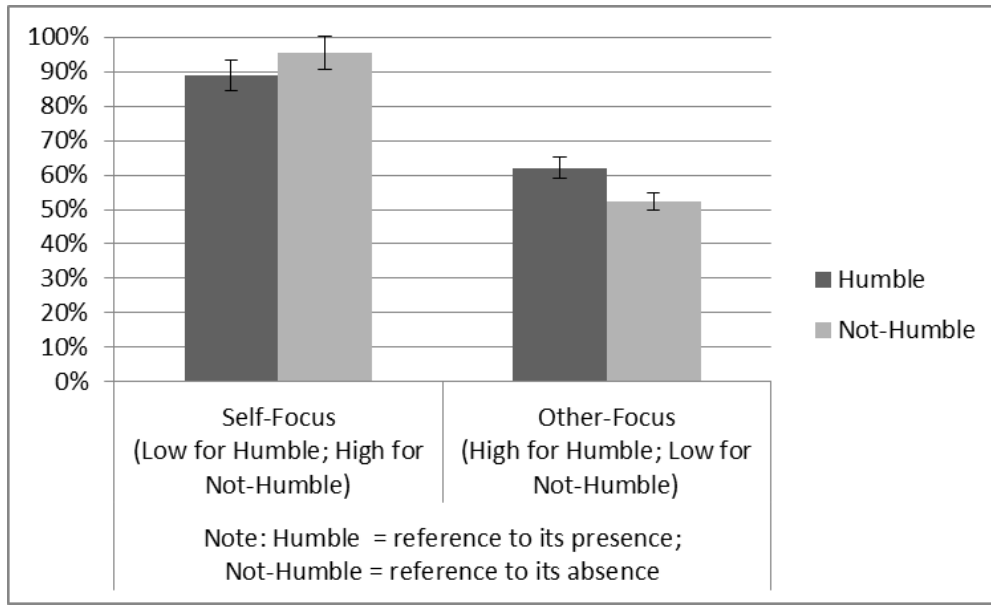


Figure 1

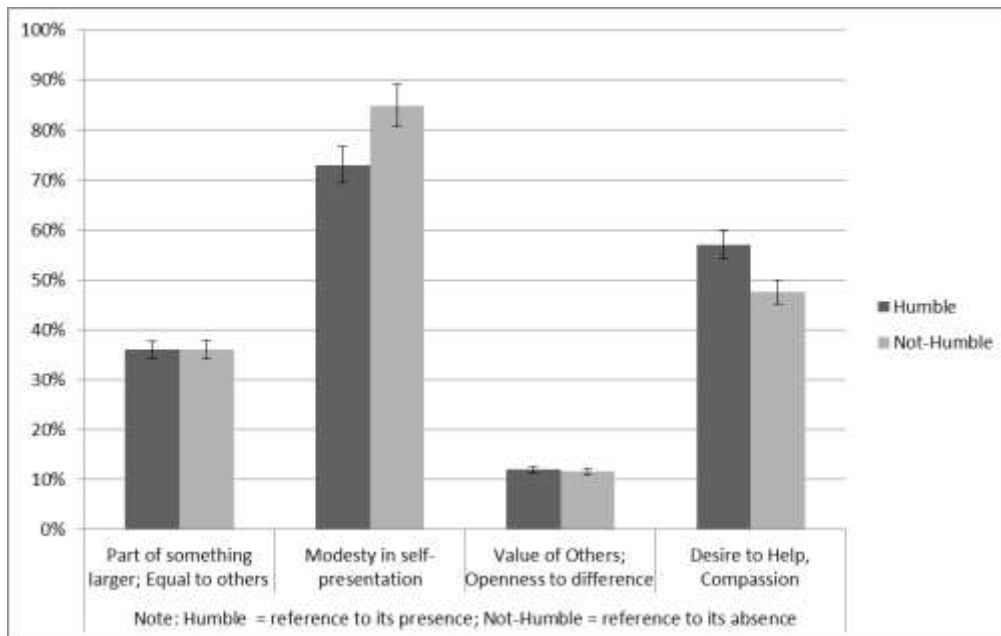


Figure 2

Adolescent Data. Overall, 32% of the 131 participants made reference to one or both aspects of low self-focus. Of that, 2% made reference only to the 1st aspect, 25% made reference only to the 2nd aspect, and 5% made reference to both. We also found that 24% of the 131 participants made reference to one or both aspects of high other-focus. Of that, none made

reference only to the 1st aspect, 22% made reference only to the 2nd aspect, and 2% made reference to both.

Looking at the results developmentally, we saw clear differences between the younger (5-6th grade) and older (7-8th grade) adolescents. For one, there was a significant increase in their reference to the 2nd aspect of low self-focus: modesty in self-presentation and life style, $\chi^2(130) = 9.6, p = .002$. There was also a significant increase in their reference to the 2nd aspect of high other-focus: desire to help others, placing others' needs above one's own, $\chi^2(130) = 11.9, p < .001$. And, finally, there was a significant increase in the number of participants who made reference to both dimensions—low self-focus and high other-focus, $\chi^2(130) = 13.6, p < .001$ (Fig. 3).

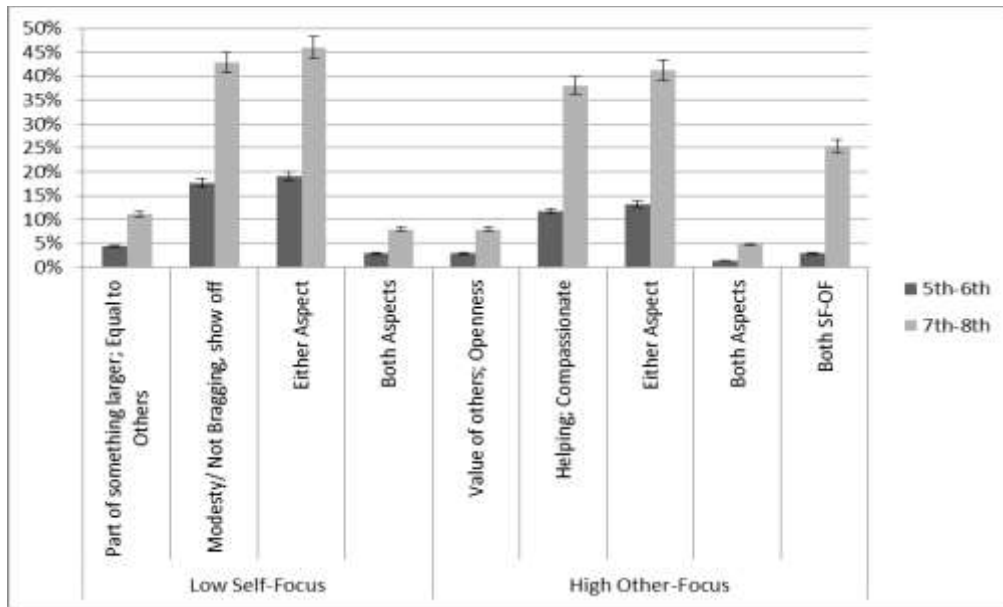


Figure 3

Combined Data. We compared the adult data to the adolescent data and found significant differences between the adolescents and adults on multiple fronts. Specifically, the adults made significantly greater reference than the adolescents to all aspects of low self-focus, considered

alone and together: the 1st aspect only, $\chi^2(230) = 29.2, p < .001$, the 2nd aspect only, $\chi^2(230) = 49.9, p < .001$, either aspect, $\chi^2(230) = 83.4, p < .001$, or both aspects, $\chi^2(230) = 12.4, p = .002$.

The adults also made significantly greater reference than the adolescents to the 2nd, but not the 1st, aspect of high other-focus when considered alone – but not together: the 1st aspect only, $\chi^2(230) = 4.3, p = .116$ (not significant), the 2nd aspect only, $\chi^2(230) = 34.4, p < .001$, either aspect, $\chi^2(230) = 41.9, p < .001$, or both aspects, $\chi^2(230) = 3.2, p = .201$ (not significant).

Finally, examining the frequency of reference to low self-focus and high other-focus across age groups revealed a clear developmental trend—the older the participants, the more references they made (Fig. 4).

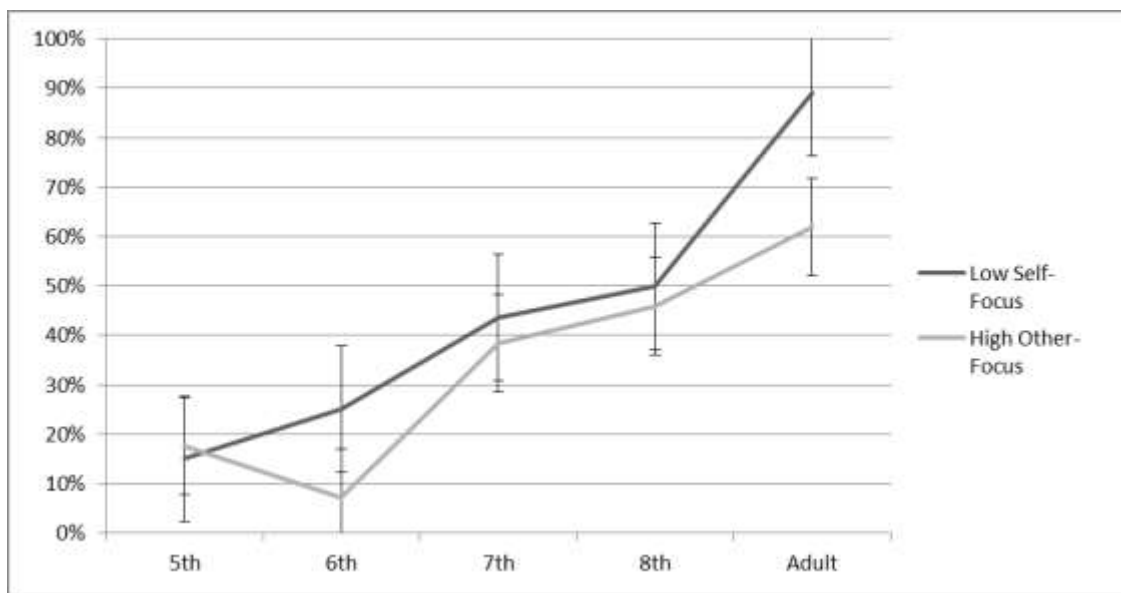


Figure 4

Discussion. This first stage of analysis revealed that, in line with what our scale construction revealed, both adolescents’ and adults’ folk concept of humility involved existential awareness and devotion to others—and the emphasis placed on these two dimensions steadily increased as the participants got older. In other words, both adolescents and adults viewed humility as involving a shift in focus *away from oneself* and/or *towards others*.

As central to their folk concept as these dimensions were (especially for the older participants), they were clearly not the only attributes present. Indeed, people's descriptions of the humble person were rich and varied. So, we decided to do a more extensive analysis of their folk concepts, described below.

3.2.1 2nd Stage of Folk Concept Coding: Deeper Analysis of Descriptions

Hand-Coding: Adult Data. Two independent coders went through the folk concept entries and identified and tallied each of the discrete concepts that participants used to describe the humble (or not humble) person. These were then collapsed into meaningful categories. This coding was done independently of the 1st stage of coding, with no knowledge of the results of that coding.

For the “humble” condition, 784 discrete concept “instances” were coded, which then were collapsed into 20 categories. For the “not humble” condition, 672 discrete concepts were coded, which were further collapsed into 16 (of the 20) categories. In addition to the four categories coded for in the 1st stage (low self-focus and high other-focus, with two aspects for each), there were 16 other categories that people mentioned when describing humble and not humble people. For example, people described humble people as *Calm/Peaceful/Patient* people (7% of instances), as *Admirable/Dignified* (6%), *Honest/Trustworthy* (4%), *Hardworking* (3%), *Reliable/Responsible* (2%), *Wise/Mature/Educated* (2%), *Friendly/Easygoing* (2%), and *Happy/Content* (2%), while not-humble people were often described as *lacking* these qualities (e.g., *not modest, unhelpful*), which were coded as *negative* instances of the relevant categories, and/or possessing their opposites (e.g., *greedy/materialistic*), which were coded as separate categories (see Fig. 5 for the distribution across all 20 categories).

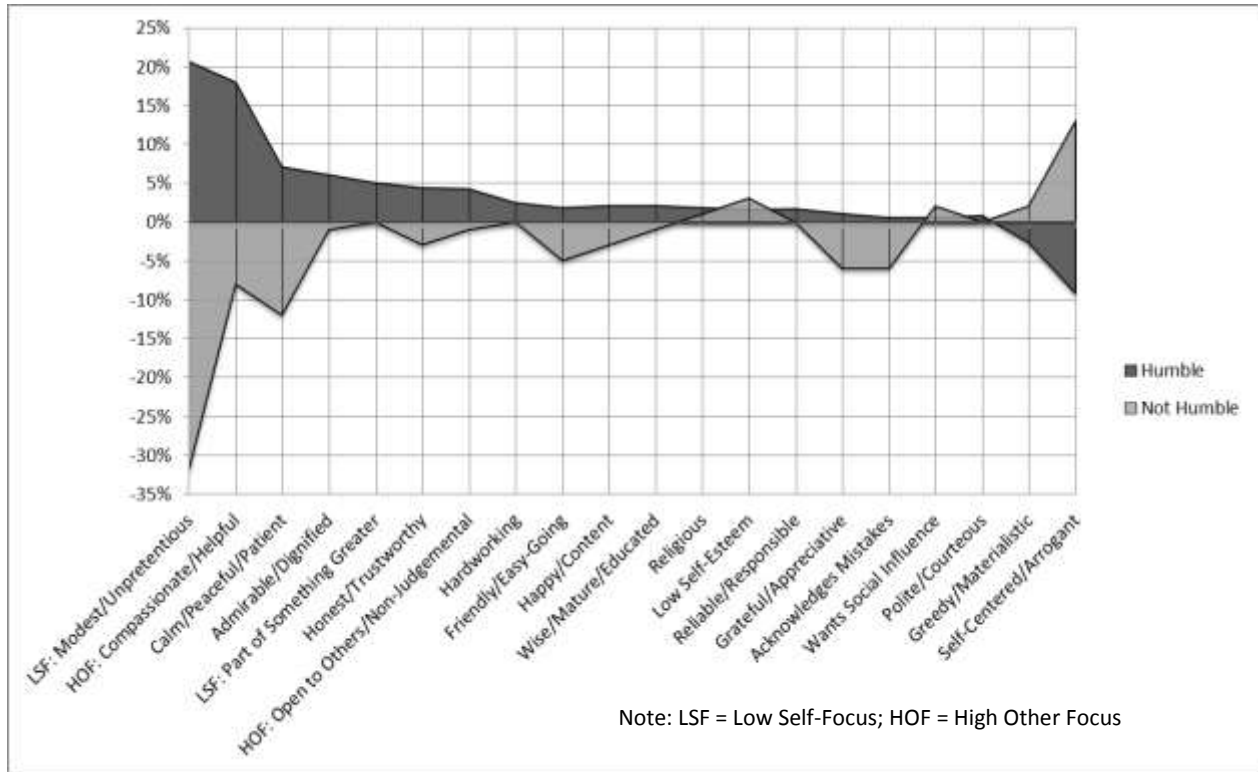


Figure 5

Hand-Coding: Adolescent Data. Two coders went through the adolescent folk concept entries and identified and tallied 244 discrete concept “instances” that participants used to describe the humble person. These were then collapsed into meaningful categories—18 of the 20 categories from the adult data (the exceptions being *Religious* and *Greedy/Materialistic*) and then 6 additional categories. That is, in addition to viewing humble people as *Calm/Peaceful/Patient*, *Admirable/Dignified*, *Honest/Trustworthy*, *Wise/Mature/Educated*, and *Friendly/Easygoing* (as did the adults), the adolescent participants also described them as *Shy*, *Sad/Afraid*, *Unique*, *Confident* and *Lonely*. And they also viewed them as having *Suffered Through* (or as being able to suffer through) *Hardship* (Fig. 6).

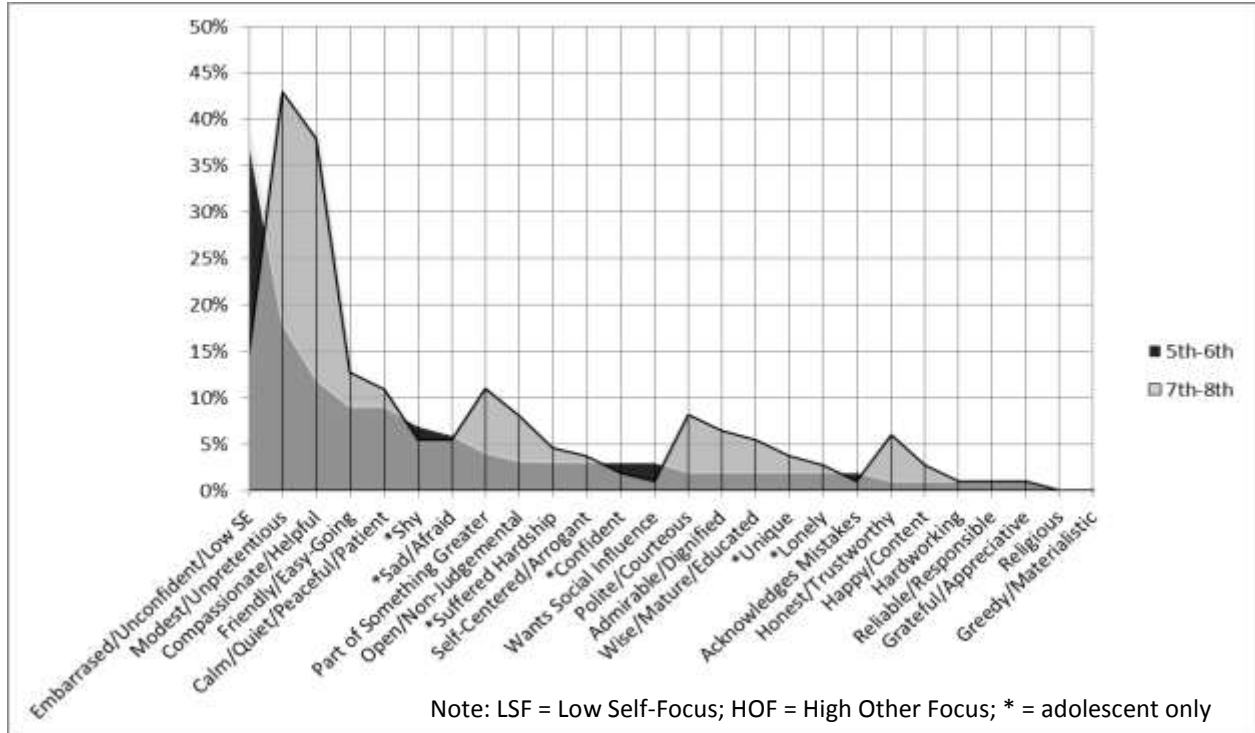


Figure 6

One thing that stood out about the adolescent data (relative to the adult data) was the frequency with which they described the humble person as “low-minded”—i.e., as being *embarrassed about themselves, lacking confidence, and having low self-esteem*—which is something the adults did very little (2% of 784 instances). And there was a clear developmental trend, with the 5th-6th graders making reference to the humble person’s “low-mindedness” significantly more frequency (38%) than the 7th-8th graders (15%), $t(129) = 3.2, p = .002$, or the adults, $t(166) = 5.7, p < .001$.

This is particularly interesting, given the tension between the negative (low-minded/self-abasement) and more positive accounts of humility discussed in the Introduction. And this is unlikely to be merely a byproduct of misunderstanding (e.g., mistaking the word “humility” for “humiliation”) because the participants were all verbally instructed that someone *with a lot of humility* was someone *who was humble*, in order to make explicit the link between *humility* and

humble and to discourage associating *humility* with *humiliation* (without unduly influencing their responses). Despite these instructions, the younger adolescents appeared to endorse a version of the self-abasement view of humility (i.e., the humble person is someone who is embarrassed about herself, with low confidence in her abilities, and/or low self-esteem) more frequently than the older adolescents—who endorsed it more frequently than the adults. This also likely explains the presence of some of the other attributes that did not show up in the adult data—i.e., seeing the humble person as *shy*, *sad/afraid*, and *lonely*.

Other than that, the older adolescents more frequently described the humble person as *honest/trustworthy*, $t(129) = 2.1$, $p = .041$, and *polite*, $t(129) = 2.0$, $p = .048$ than the younger adolescents, but there were no other significant differences between the age groups found.

Discussion. While low self-focus and high other-focus lie clearly at the “core” of adults’ folk concept of humility—providing confirmation for what the scale analysis suggested—we can also clearly see the developmental trajectory along which this occurs. For the youngest adolescent group interviewed (5th-6th graders), these two dimensions are starting to appear and, by 7th-8th grade, solidly take hold. But, in competition with this decentered and devoted view of humility was the more negative self-abasement view, which involved embarrassment, lack of confidence, and feeling worthless—that is, *low self-worth* rather than *low self-focus*. Future research should dig deeper into this apparent shift in people’s folk concept, to explore how and why there is a transition from low self-worth to low self-focus.

In addition, both groups of adolescents—and, to a lesser degree, adults—attributed to the humble person traits that, while desirable and/or virtuous, seem to have little to do with low self-focus or high other-focus, at least directly. Humble people were described as calm, peaceful, admirable, dignified, honest, trustworthy, and friendly. Perhaps this is a sort of “white-wash”

phenomenon—i.e., viewing people as virtuous in one way (humble) makes them more likely to seem virtuous in other ways as well. Or perhaps these are simply attributes we would expect a humble person to display, the downstream side-effects of focusing less on oneself and more on the lives and interests of others.

3.3 Folk Experiences of Humility

In addition to asking the adult participants to describe humble (or not humble) people, we also asked them to describe a moment in their lives during which they exhibited (or failed to exhibit) humility. Using the same strategy as was described above, we coded these for the types of experiences they were and found that the people asked to describe a display of humility focused mostly on moments that involved either *low self-focus* or *high other-focus*. Specifically, they talked about moments when they experienced success without boasting or seeking praise, giving/sharing credit and realizing their dependence upon others (36% of the 107 participants) and about moments in which they helped others (34%). They also focused on more general moments of low self-focus—experiencing themselves as “no better than” others, as part of something bigger (11%)—and on failures that were accompanied by low self-focus and/or personal growth (12%). They talked some about experiencing gratitude (2%) and about religion (1%). And, interestingly (given the adolescent data discussed above), there was also some discussion of being humiliated (4%) and having to endure hardship (1%; see Fig. 7).

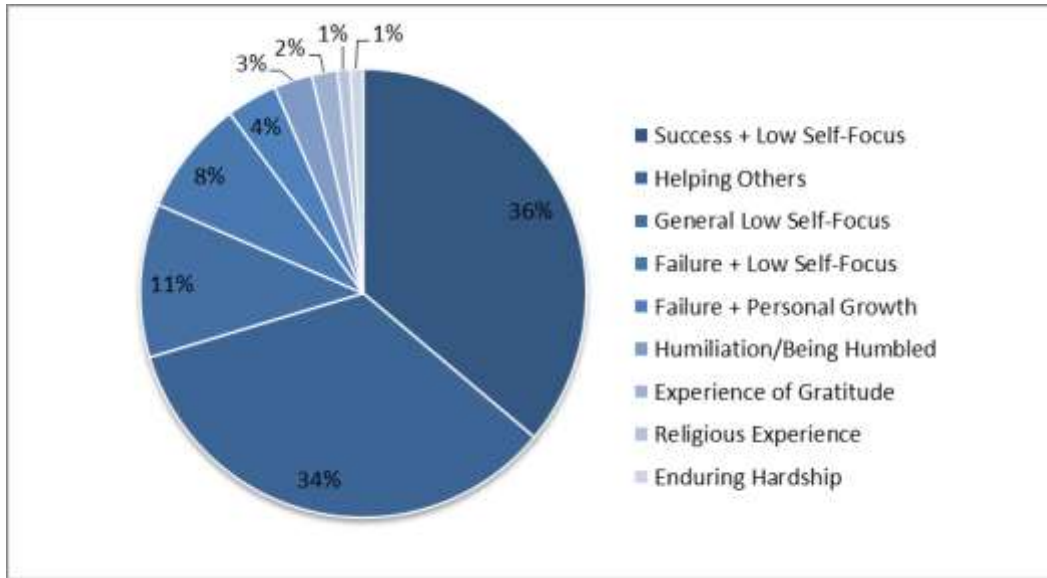


Figure 7

People’s failures to express humility were also centered on self and other-focus, though in the opposite direction. Specifically, they talked about moments when they boasted/gloated about their success or took undue credit (33% of 92 participants), or were arrogant, prideful, or conceited (30%). They also talked about moments when they mistreated others (18%), were self-centered/self-righteous (10%), judgmental /close-minded (6%), and ungrateful (3%; see Fig. 8).

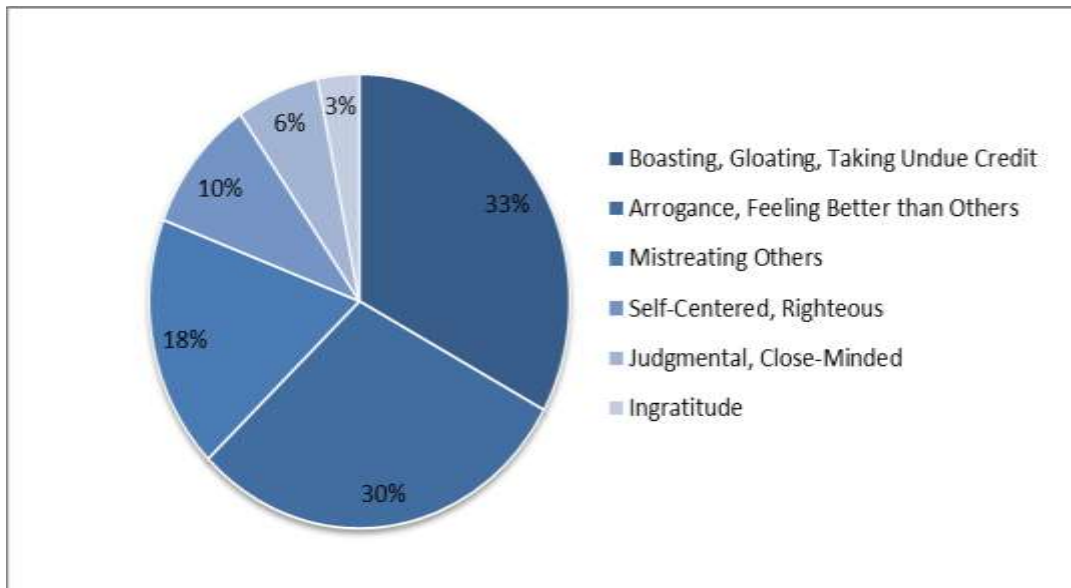


Figure 8

Discussion

Once again, we found moments of low self-focus and/or high other-focus being strongly featured in people's personal accounts of moments in their lives where they had displayed humility—and the opposite in their accounts of moments where they had failed to do so. Though less so, there was also discussion of humiliation and being humbled, and of suffering hardship—harkening back to the more negative accounts of humility, where people are “struck down” for their pride and arrogance. It is interesting to see the more negative account of humility show up in their personal experiences when it did not feature in their folk concepts more directly. Though this is entirely speculative, perhaps this sheds additional light on the developmental findings, insofar as it is often those experiences of being humbled—being “taken down a notch,” scolded for being selfish or inconsiderate, shamed for being a braggart or for showing off—in which we first encounter the value of humility, of paying *less* attention to ourselves and *more* to others. In other words, it may be that the self-abasement view of humility has a sort of remedial or educational value—and thus it is employed upon others (or upon ourselves) as a way of encouraging the development and maintenance of the more positive attributes of humility. People are naturally the centers of their own psychological “universe”—and thus, they must be knocked out of their own orbits, so to speak, before they can fully appreciate the insignificance of that universe compared to the totality of other universes that co-exist alongside their own. For our adolescent sample, the negative aspects of humility—of “being humbled”—were likely more salient because they were just beginning to have those sorts of experiences themselves. For our adult sample, on the other hand, those aspects were less salient, being a part of past experiences meant to facilitate a shift in one's psychological orientation to one's self and the world.

4. General Discussion and Conclusion

We had three primary goals in this paper. First, we wanted to survey the competing varieties of humility that have been discussed by theologians and philosophers from antiquity to the present day. Second, we wanted to present the results of our own attempts to shed empirical light on the role played by humility in ordinary language and commonsense morality. Finally, we wanted to discuss the relevance of our findings to the ongoing debate concerning the nature and value of humility. Having now accomplished our first two goals, we are finally in a position to say a few words about whether there are any varieties of humility worth wanting.

In short, we believe that while there are some conceptions of humility that are problematic on moral, psychological, and epistemological grounds, there are others that cast humility in a much more favorable light. On our view, rather than associating humility with self-abasement and low-mindedness and consequently treating it as a “negative, debilitating trait that contributes to the disempowerment of the agent” (p. 211),⁵⁶ we should instead associate humility with the more positive capacities of low self-focus and high other-focus. The reasons for doing so are, first, that this latter variety of humility is free of the problems associated with the former view, and second, this more positive conception of humility comports with how people ordinarily think and talk about the nature and value of humility. So, rather than following the likes of Spinoza, Hume, Nietzsche, and Sidgwick in adopting the self-abasement view of humility and then dismissing humility as a vice, we believe we should instead adopt a more intuitive and less problematic view that enables us to capture common sense morality while at the same time treating humility as an important virtue.

At the end of the day, we believe our empirical findings support Snow’s suggestion that, “the exercise of humility in actions, when viewed as a strategy for success despite the awareness

⁵⁶ N. Snow, ‘Humility’.

of limitations, is empowering and supports the development of other positive traits. For this and the other reasons mentioned above, humility ought to be regarded as a virtue worth wanting” (p. 215).⁵⁷ Not only is humility, thusly conceived, associated with virtuous traits such as altruism, compassion, and forgiveness, but it also helps stave off vices such as arrogance, vanity, selfishness, and conceit. By making low self-focus and high other-focus the twin hallmarks of humility, we strip away most (if not all) of the features of humility that have led to its philosophical disfavor.

Various forms of this positive conception of humility can be found in the empirical literature as well—where psychologists have associated humility with the presence of empathy, gentleness, respect, and appreciation for the equality, autonomy, and value of others,⁵⁸ gratitude,⁵⁹ a willingness to share credit for accomplishments and acknowledge mistakes,⁶⁰ and an openness to new or divergent ideas.⁶¹ As Rowden (2009) put it, humility involves a shift from the narrow preoccupation with self *or* other into the broader consideration of self *and* other.⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., S. Halling, G. Kunz, & J.O. Rowe, ‘The Contributions of Dialogal Psychology to Phenomenological Research’, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 34:1 (1994), pp. 109-131, J.R. Means, G.L. Wilson, C. Sturm, J.E. Biron, & P.J. Bach, ‘Humility as a Psychotherapeutic Formulation’, *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 3:2 (1990), pp. 211-215, S.J. Sandage, ‘An Ego-humility Model of Forgiveness: A Theory-driven Empirical Test of Group Interventions’, *Dissertation Abstracts International* 59 (1999), p. 3712, J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility’, in C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 1st edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 411-419, J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility’.

⁵⁹ R.A. Emmons, ‘Religion in the Psychology of Personality: An Introduction’.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., J.J. Exline & A.L. Geyer, ‘Perceptions of Humility: A Preliminary Study’, *Self & Identity* 3:2 (2004), pp. 95-114, J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility’.

⁶¹ See, e.g., W.H. Gantt, ‘On Humility in Science’, *Conditional Reflex* 2:3 (1967), pp. 179-183, S.P. Harrell & M.A. Bond, ‘Listening to Diversity Stories: Principles for Practice in Community Research and Action’, *American Journal of Community Psychology* 37:3-4 (2006), pp. 365-376, J.A. Morris, C.M. Brotheridge, & J.C. Urbanski, ‘Bringing Humility to Leadership: Antecedents and Consequences of Leader Humility’, *Human Relations* 58:10 (2005), pp. 1323-1350, A. Neuringer, ‘Humble Behaviorism’, *The Behavior Analyst* 14:1 (1991), pp. 1-13, J.M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach*. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), J.P. Tangney, ‘Humility’.

⁶² T. Rowden, *Humility as Catalyst of Client Change: A Delphi Study* (2009). Dissertation available online: <https://repositories.tdl.org/ttu-ir/handle/2346/10065>.

In our recent empirical work,⁶³ we have tried to build on the extant research by examining the relationship between our humility scale and several other related constructs. We started with the following two specific predictions:

- **Prediction 1: Other-orientation.** *Participants' scores on our scale should be positively correlated important "other-oriented" or "other-regard", as well as other morally relevant, psychological variables.*
- **Prediction 2: Indicators of psychological health and wellbeing.** *Participants' scores on our scale should be positively correlated with variables associated with psychological health—and negatively correlated with variables associated with psychological disorder/disease.*

We found evidence for both predictions.⁶⁴ For Prediction 1, participants' scores were strongly correlated with their emotional empathy, their sense of civic-responsibility, and their community-oriented values (universalism/benevolence, as well as tradition/conformity). Moreover, participants' scores were strongly correlated with their humanitarian ideals and their commitment to egalitarianism, their charitability, the importance of moral values and attributes to their self-identity, and their sense of integrity. Finally, their scores were positively correlated with their tendency to feel guilt and reparative (but not withdrawal) shame when having acted badly and were negatively correlated with material and social greed.

As for Prediction 2, we found that participants' scores were strongly correlated with their conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience, their agentic values of self-direction and achievement (though not power, stimulation, or hedonism), their sense of personal

⁶³ See, e.g., J.C. Wright, T. Nadelhoffer, L. Ross, & W. Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Be It Ever So Humble: An Updated Account and Scale for Humility', T. Nadelhoffer & J.C. Wright, J. 'The Twin Hallmarks of Humility', in C. Miller & W. Sinnott-Armstrong (eds.), *Moral Psychology: Virtues and Vices*, Vol. 5 (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming).

⁶⁴ All of the correlations reported here were significant at $\alpha < .01$.

growth and positive life-regard—both in terms of the “frame” through which they viewed their lives and the purpose they assigned to it. Moreover, their scores were positively correlated with secure adult attachment and their capacity for positive growth and relationships. We also found that people higher in humility were somewhat more mindful and had much greater appreciation for the simple pleasures of life and other people. They were also less inclined towards sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

We believe the existing data collectively suggest that humility—at least as it has been defined by us and other researchers—is a trait that is deeply intertwined with other morally and socially desirable capacities and traits, making it (at a minimum) of instrumental value.⁶⁵ Small wonder, then, that humility is viewed favorably by most people. As such, we believe it is important when theorizing about humility to cast being humble in as favorable light as possible—especially when doing so enjoys empirical support along several distinct lines of investigation. After all, our findings on the role played by humility in ordinary language and commonsense morality make it clear that laypersons do not generally share the philosopher’s skepticism about humility. Instead, people of varying ages tend to admire individuals who exemplify humility and they view individuals who lack humility disfavorably. Given the core elements of the ordinary understanding of humility—namely, low self-focus and high other-focus—this is unsurprising.

This is not to say there is no place in our modern conception for the self-abasement view of humility. Indeed, our data suggest (tentatively, of course) that the experience of being humbled, of being “brought down” to see oneself as “lowly”, humiliated in the eyes of another (and/or of oneself)—while neither necessary nor sufficient for humility—may nonetheless play

⁶⁵ For present purposes, we remain neutral with respect to humility’s intrinsic value. That’s partly because we are divided on this issue ourselves. So, this is a debate for another day.

an important role in the shifting of one's psychological positioning relative to other living beings and the larger universe. The self-abasement view only starts to look problematic when it is treated as the centerpiece of humility. But insofar as this runs afoul of how people ordinarily think and talk about humility, we see no reason to either endorse or adopt it—especially when less problematic varieties of humility are already embedded in commonsense morality.

One way of highlighting the philosophical importance of starting with an adequate account of humility when philosophical theorizing is to revisit Hume's assessment of humility—which he dismissed as a “mere monkish virtue.” Owing to his background account of the instrumental nature of the virtues (see below) and his background assumption that humility requires self-abasement and low-mindedness, Hume quite understandably dismisses the value of being humble. After all, on a Humean account of virtue, the virtues are counted as such because they are instrumentally valuable in any one of four ways: (a) they are useful or agreeable to the person who possesses them, or (b) they are useful or agreeable to others.⁶⁶ Because Hume adopted something like the self-abasement view of humility, he thereby assumed that humility is neither useful nor agreeable to the humble individual and neither useful nor agreeable to others. It is for this reason that Hume claims that humility is a “mere monkish virtue” that is “rejected everywhere [as a virtue] by men of sense.” Or so one could plausibly argue.

For present purposes, the lesson is that one could adopt a Humean conception of virtue, which highlights the interpersonal and intrapersonal instrumental value of the virtues, while at the same time rejecting his conception of humility.⁶⁷ By cleaving the two apart, we end up with a

⁶⁶ For a more detailed account of Hume's instrumentalist account of virtue, see R. Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics and Human Nature’, *Hume Studies* 25:1-2 (1999), pp. 67-82.

⁶⁷ One reason we don't outright endorse a Humean conception of virtue is that we do not agree amongst ourselves about whether Hume was right. While one of us is a Humean about virtues, one of us is not (while others are undecided). For present purposes, it's enough to show that one could consistently be a Humean about the virtues and endorse humility as a virtue (pace Hume).

plausible way of determining whether something is a virtue—namely, looking to see whether it is instrumentally valuable to self or others. We also open up the conceptual and empirical space to argue that humility is a virtue, once we define humility in terms of low self-focus and high-other focus rather than self-abasement. By treating these former traits as the twin hallmarks of humility, we end up with a Humean argument for treating humility as a virtue.

In Hume's defense, the self-abasement view of humility was likely to have been the view embedded in common sense morality when he wrote *An Enquiry Concerning Moral Understanding*. But if the gathering data are to be trusted (and we believe that they should) then it appears that the folk concept of humility has changed since Hume's day.⁶⁸ This is neither surprising nor problematic. Concepts are not ahistorical and immutable. Rather, they shift and change through time in the face of cultural and ideological changes. The fact that people used to talk about humility in ways best captured by the self-abasement view is no reason for adopting that view today—especially when the role played by humility in ordinary language and commonsense morality has already shifted away from self-abasement and towards low-self focus and high other-focus.

Our own preferred account of humility represents a departure from the traditional self-abasement view because that is where the recent philosophical work and the empirical data lead us. Given that concepts change over time, we always have a choice when it comes to whether to preserve the old meaning or embrace a new one (or even eliminate it altogether in some cases). In the case of humility, we think everything speaks in favor of adopting the decentered and devoted view and nothing speaks in favor of reverting back to the self-abasement view that held sway during the Middle Ages (and seems to have influenced how humility was treated by

⁶⁸ It's also possible that the folk concept during Hume's day was the same one that we find evidence for today. If so, then he was actually mistaken when it comes to commonsense morality and humility, regardless of whether or not he was right about the instrumental nature of virtue.

modern philosophers like Hume). The concept of humility has already undergone (what we take to be) positive change in the minds of the masses—and we see no reason to stem the tide. Indeed, it is those who would insist that we continue to define “humility” in terms of self-abasement, self-denigration, self-deception, and even self-loathing who should shoulder the argumentative burden of proof. On our view, rather than trying to turn back the clock on the nature and value of humility, the critics of humility would be much better off embracing a variety of humility worth wanting—namely, one that places a premium on existential awareness and devotion to the lives and interests of others.⁶⁹

Compliance with Ethical Standards

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Office for Research and Grants Administration at College of Charleston (IRB-2013-08-31-144538).

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

⁶⁹ We have presented earlier versions of this paper at the following institutions/events: Buffalo Annual Experimental Philosophy Conference at SUNY Buffalo, Capstone Conference for Intellectual Humility Grant, The Moral Psychology Reading Group Workshop at Duke University, and an Invited Symposium on Humility as part of the main program of the Pacific Division of The American Philosophical Association. We would like to thank the audience members for their helpful suggestions. We would also like to thank the two anonymous referees for *The Journal of Moral Philosophy* who provided us with invaluable feedback. Addressing their concerns has greatly improved the paper. Finally, this research was supported by The Fuller Theological Seminary/Thrive Center in concert with the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Fuller Theological Seminary/Thrive Center or the John Templeton Foundation.

