

RUNNING HEAD: PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HUMILITY

The Psychological Significance of Humility

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Abstract

Humility is a virtue with a rich and varied past. Its benefits and pitfalls—indeed, its status as a virtue—have been debated by philosophers and theologians. Recently, psychologists have entered into the dialectic, with a small but growing body of empirical research at their disposal. We will discuss this research on humility, including our own recent contributions. Our goal is to shed light on the following three important questions: First, what is humility? Second, why we should care about being humble? Finally, are there constructive steps we can take to induce people to adopt more humble attitudes towards themselves and others? In the process of answering these questions we will consider the major empirical accounts of humility in the literature, highlight their primary difficulties, and then introduce a new account that cuts through the confusion, getting to the core of what we take humility to be.

The Psychological Significance of Humility

Humility does not consist in handsome people trying to believe they are ugly, and clever people trying to believe they are fools...True humility is more like self-forgetfulness...It leaves people free to esteem their special talents and, with the same honesty, to esteem their neighbor's. Both the neighbor's talents and one's own are recognized as gifts and, like one's height, are not fit subjects for either inordinate pride or self-deprecation. (Buri, 1988, p. 93)

Humility is a virtue with a rich and varied past. Its benefits and pitfalls—indeed, even its status as a virtue—have long been debated by philosophers and theologians. More recently, psychologists have entered into the dialectical fray, with a small but growing body of empirical research at their disposal. In this paper, we will discuss some of the extant empirical research on humility, including our own recent attempts to contribute to this research. Our goal will be to shed light on the following three important questions: First, what is humility? Second, why we should care about being humble? Finally, are there constructive steps we can take to induce people to adopt more humble attitudes towards themselves and others?

In the process of answering these questions we will consider the major empirical accounts of humility in the literature, highlight what we take to be their primary difficulties, and then introduce a new account that cuts through the confusion, getting to the core of what we take humility to be. And since this manuscript is a part of a special edition on intellectual humility, at the end we'll briefly discuss the connection between humility as a moral vs. an epistemic virtue.

What Is Humility? Providing and Operationalizing a Definition

In the theological and philosophical literature, the dominant view of humility for centuries was a fairly dark one. Most famously, it was touted within the Christian tradition as a form of extreme self-abnegation—what Aquinas (1274) referred to as “self-abasement to the lowest place” (II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 2). Today, that view of humility lingers on—for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (McArthur, 1998) defines humility as “the quality of being

humble or of having a lowly opinion of oneself; meekness, lowliness, humbleness: the opposite of pride or haughtiness”; Funk & Wagnall (1963) as “lowly in kind, state, condition, etc.; of little worth, unimportant...having a sense of insignificance, unworthiness, dependence, or sinfulness”.

Finding this conception of humility too extreme, other philosophers have more recently argued that humility (and related constructs like modesty; see, for example, Driver, 1989) is a kind of socially useful deception, one in which people must downplay (to both others and themselves) their own accomplishments and worth—increasingly so, the more they possess them. On this view, while humility may require some self-deception or ignorance it is nevertheless useful insofar as it contributes to our collective social well-being by reducing conflict over one another’s status, and the associated envy.

We have argued that both of the above views of humility have serious problems (Nadelhoffer, Wright, Echols, Perini, & Venezia, 2015; Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). We won’t repeat those arguments again here—except to say that there is something deeply problematic about a virtue that requires self-abasement, at its most extreme, or self-deception and/or epistemic ignorance, at its least. For present purposes, we want to turn our attention instead to some of the recent empirical work that has been done on the psychology of humility—a research program that has been beset from the outset with difficulties.

As Davis, Worthington, and Hook (2010) have pointed out, one serious problem with the extant work on humility is that researchers have failed to clearly define what it is they take humility to be (and not to be). One source of confusion has been the conflation of humility with other traits and constructs. For example, the most prominent measures of humility—the VIA (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the HEXACO (Lee & Ashton, 2004)—mix features of humility with other related constructs, such as modesty (both scales), honesty, sincerity, greed-avoidance,

and fairness (HEXACO only). However, recent data suggest that humility is distinct from these other constructs and should therefore be measured separately (Davis et al., 2010; Wright et al. 2015).¹

The other difficulty with the empirical work on humility has been that, rather than providing a definition of what humility is, researchers have largely conceptualized humility in terms of the attributes or qualities that it produces and/or are accompanied by it. Many of these have been *internal* attributes or qualities—such as the view that humility involves having a moderate or accurate view of oneself (Baumeister & Exline, 2002; Emmons, 1999; Rowatt, Ottenbreit, Nesselroade, & Cunningham, 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, 1992; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Templeton, 1997).

¹ The VIA scale also classifies modesty-humility as one of the “character strengths” that falls under the virtue of *temperance*, which is defined as the virtue that “protects against excess” and includes the strengths of modesty-humility as well as forgiveness, prudence, and self-regulation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Humility is, therefore, considered to be separate from those character strengths that “forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning” (composing the virtue of *transcendence*) and those that “involve tending and befriending others” (composing the virtue of *humanity*). Yet, as should be clear, both of these “virtues” are relevant to our proposed account of humility. What is more, modesty-humility is considered to be separate from the character strengths that “entail the acquisition and use of knowledge” (composing the virtue of *wisdom/knowledge*), but if we consider again Tangney’s (2000) features of humility—i.e., being both able and inclined to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often vis-a-vis a “higher power”); being open to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice—it seems unlikely that humility doesn’t have at least some sort of role to play in this area as well. In short, leaving aside the fact that the VIA’s characterization of “virtues” has been criticized as being under-theorized and conceptualized, as well as largely unsupported by empirical research (Nofle, Schnitker, & Robins, 2011; see also Kristjansson, 2013), we feel that their conceptualization of humility is flawed. And while the HEXACO seems less conceptually problematic (cf. Block, 1995; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), we are nonetheless uneasy with measuring honesty-humility as a personality trait on par with the other Big 5 (i.e., extroversion, agreeableness, etc.).

Other attributes or qualities that have been identified as humility have been *interpersonal*—such as the presence of 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, 2005; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007). 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.

Davis et al. (2012) takes a somewhat different approach, proposing that humility is not something possessed by an individual *per se*, but rather is an *interpersonal judgment* about that individual that we make. That is, when we judge of another that she possesses certain attributes or qualities, we judge that she is humble. The attributes or qualities being judged are things such as the tendency to express positive other-oriented emotions in one's relationships (e.g., empathy, compassion, sympathy, and love), the ability to regulate self-oriented emotions in socially acceptable ways (e.g., pride or excitement about one's accomplishments), and having an accurate view of self.²

While novel, the major difficulty with this approach is that it is odd to say that we judge of someone that she does (or does not) possesses certain attributes or qualities without also

²This is an expansion upon the two attributes and qualities given in Davis et al. 2011, which were: being interpersonally other-oriented rather than self-focused, marked by a lack of superiority, and having an accurate view of self—not too inflated or too low.

thereby assuming that she actually does (or does not) *possess* them—and therefore, that she is (or is not) humble. Accordingly, this account appears to collapse back into the other accounts, which define humility in terms of positive personal and interpersonal attributes or qualities possessed (or not) by an individual.

In summary, most empirical approaches to humility taken thus far suffer from a similar flaw: they do not make clear 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 to humility may 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.

The Core of Humility

So, what is the *core* of humility? Our position is that humility is a *particular psychological positioning of oneself*—namely, one that is both *epistemically* and *ethically aligned*.

By “epistemically aligned”,³ we mean that humility is the understanding and experience of oneself *as one, in fact, is*—namely, as a finite and fallible being that is but an infinitesimal part of a vast universe, and so has a necessarily limited and incomplete perspective or grasp on the “whole”, which is infinitely larger and greater than oneself. This is often experienced spiritually, as a connection to God or some higher power, though it can also be experienced

³ We use “aligned” here to remain neutral between a (stronger) accuracy requirement and a (weaker) justification requirement.

through an awareness of one's place in, and connection to, the natural world and/or cosmos (a state of "existential awareness"). In this way, humility is a corrective to our natural tendency to treat our "selves" as "special", to strongly prioritize or privilege our own mental states (e.g., our beliefs, values, etc.) and capacities (e.g., skills, abilities, etc.)—i.e., to seek social praise, status, acclaim, influence over others—and have undue attachment to them⁴ simply because they are ours.

By "ethically aligned", we mean that humility is the understanding and experience of oneself as only one among a host of other morally relevant beings, whose interests are foundationally as legitimate, and as worthy of attention and concern, as one's own (a state of "extended compassion").⁵ In this way, humility is a corrective to our natural tendency to strongly prioritize or privilege our own needs, interests, desires, benefits, etc.—i.e., to seek "premium treatment" for ourselves, even at significant cost to others—simply because they are ours.

Humility, Operationalized

Elsewhere (Nadelhoffer et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2015), we have operationalized this core as being measureable along two distinct, but related, dimensions.

Low self-focus. The first dimension is low "self-focus". By this, we do not mean low self-esteem, or even necessarily low self-concern, but rather the low *self-prioritization* (or "self-importance") that follows from this proper psychological positioning. Being epistemically aligned results in a reduced sense of "ego"—a reduced attachment to one's "self" and its products and capacities. This is not to say that a humble person fails to appreciate and utilize her

⁴ This is meant to encompass a variety of things—e.g., our tendency to have unwarranted confidence in our beliefs/abilities, to defend and/or champion them beyond what is appropriate, etc., as well as our tendency to view our way of thinking about and living in the world as "better".

⁵ This is not to say that we have the exact same moral *responsibilities* towards everyone—there are a variety of moral and social factors that rightfully add layers and nuances to our various moral responsibilities. For example, my own child's needs/interests will rightfully carry more weight for me in most situations than they do for my neighbor or than do the needs/interests of an unknown child living across the city—though less so than we might be inclined to think.

beliefs, values, skills, and abilities—it is simply that she holds them in perspective and what matters is the things that can be accrued by and accomplished with them, not that they are *hers*. Behavioral manifestations of low self-focus commonly 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 life-style (i.e., modesty, open-mindedness, etc.).

High other-focus. The second dimension is high “other-focus”. By this, we mean a corresponding increase in one’s orientation *outwards*—specifically, towards other morally relevant beings. Being epistemically aligned results in an increased prioritization of their needs, interests, and benefits and increased concern for their well-being, as well as an increased appreciation for the value of others, generally speaking and an increased sense of connectedness. This is not to say that a humble person fails to care about her own welfare or pursue her own interests—it is simply that she sees these as being deeply intertwined with the welfare and interests of others. Behavioral manifestations of high other-focus commonly 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.).

Evidence for Our View

Evidence for this two-dimensional operational definition of humility comes from two independent sources—first, our investigation of people’s “folk concept” of humility (partially reported in Nadelhoffer et al., 2015); second, through our development of a new, and recently validated, humility scale (Wright et al., 2015; Wright, Nadelhoffer, & Ross, 2015). We briefly review these in turn.

Folk concept of humility. We conducted three separate studies with different age groups—specifically with middle school, high school, and adult samples—which we will describe below.

Adult sample. In our first study we surveyed group of 199 adults⁶, asking them to describe either what a person fully possessing the virtue of humility—or what a person completely lacking the virtue of humility—would be like (see Nadelhoffer et al., 2015 for details). We found that in the humility condition, 89% of the participants made reference 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; 62% made reference 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.

These were by far the most common attributes/qualities assigned to the humble exemplar, the next most common (at 25%) being positive psychological attributes (e.g., calm, peaceful, non-materialistic, friendly, and easy-going) and (18%) virtues (e.g., admirable, dignified, honest, trustworthy, hardworking, and responsible).

Likewise, in the lack of humility condition, 95% made reference to the *lack of* low self-focus and 52% made reference to the *lack of* high other-focus. Again, these were the most common attributes assigned to the non-humble exemplar, the next most common (at 41%) being negative psychological attributes/qualities (e.g., not calm or peaceful, greedy, self-centered, arrogant, unfriendly, uptight, ungrateful, and inappreciative) and (11%) vices (e.g., rigid, dogmatic, dominating, dishonest, and untrustworthy).

⁶⁶ Nationwide sample (56% male, 77% Caucasian) gathered through Amazon Mechanical Turk.

In line with this, Exline and Geyer (2004) found that people's open-ended definitions of humility included a high degree of low self-focus—while they don't refer to it this way, we infer this from the fact that 44% made reference to “modesty” of some sort, 17% referred to unselfishness, and 19%, a lack of conceit or arrogance—though there was less direct evidence, as far as we can tell, for high other-focus.

And Landrum (2011) found a high degree of agreement for the following statements about people possessing a high degree of 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%). All of these seem relevant to low self-focus and, less strongly, high other-focus.

Youth samples. Next, we surveyed groups of 251 middle-school (6th-8th grades) and high-school (9th-12th grades) students.⁷ We asked them to think about the virtue of humility and describe what someone who has a lot of humility (i.e., who is very humble) is like. We found an interesting developmental trend in both dimensions. For the first dimension, 22% of 5th-6th graders, 54% of 7th-8th graders, 76% of 9th-10th graders, and 71% of 11th-12th graders made reference to low self-focus. For the second dimension, 15% of 5th-6th graders, 46% of 7th-8th graders, 63% of 9th-10th graders, and 67% of 11th-12th graders made reference to high other-focus (Figure 1).

One of the next most common references made—especially for the middle school students—was surprisingly negative. Fifty-six percent of 5th-6th graders, 33% 7th-8th graders, and 10% of both 9th-10th and 11th-12th graders talked about highly humble people as being

⁷ Sample (55% male, 80% Caucasian) gathered from several different local schools in the southern US.

embarrassed or otherwise feeling badly about themselves and/or something they did, as having suffered hardship, and as being sad, lonely, or shy.

Interestingly, 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 *being humbled* could be one of the many developmental paths to becoming humble (though clearly more research would need to be done to establish this).⁸

Importantly, the youth sample—especially the high school students—also made reference to more positive attributes. For example, 17% of both 9th-10th and 11th-12th graders (as well as 22% of 5th-6th graders and 35% of 7th-8th graders) made reference to positive psychological attributes (e.g., friendly, easy-going, simple, down-to-earth, calm, peaceful, polite, courteous, grateful, appreciative, happy, and content). They also—somewhat less frequently—made reference to positive moral attributes (e.g., admirable, dignified, honest, trustworthy, wise, mature, able to acknowledge mistakes, hardworking, reliable, and responsible).

Given that all of the data discussed above, including ours, was collected in the U.S., it is important to note that the concept of humility that has emerged could be unique to the US—or, at

⁸ We discuss this possibility—and its significance—in more detail in Nadelhoffer et al., 2015 and Wright et al., 2015. We hope to do more research to explore this possibility in the future.

least, to more western cultures.⁹ Future research will have to extend this project into other, especially non-western, cultures to determine how broadly it exists.

Humility scale. One of our objectives in creating a new scale to measure humility was to test whether the underlying construct being measured by that scale would support our own account of humility. In other words, we did not go into it *presuming* our account, but rather to see whether it would emerge on its own through the scale construction process. To this end, our team (composed of both psychologists and philosophers) cast the net as widely as possible, ultimately generating 210 items designed to thoroughly canvass the conceptual territory—covering the different views of humility, as well as positively and negatively related constructs such as open-mindedness, tolerance, public vs. personal modesty, arrogance, entitlement, and moral flexibility vs. steadfastness, etc. (see Wright et al., 2015).

Through several rounds of data collection and analysis, during which over 2,000 U.S. adult participants' responses to potential scale items were collected and run through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, we honed this massive set of items down to a scale containing 25 items with five different sub-scales (5 items each). From the data emerged one clear factor for low self-focus (which further broke down into distinct religious, cosmic, and natural environment sub-factors) and another clear factor for high other-focus, along with fifth factor best conceptualized as an indirect measure of people's attitudes about the value of humility.

Due to low factor loadings and poor correlations, none of the more negative aspects of humility remained in the scale. And all of the other constructs we had included (e.g., 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. In

⁹ Though, anecdotally, during conferences, we've received comments from a variety of eastern philosophy and religion scholars that suggest otherwise.

other words, participants appeared to agree with our operational definition of humility as centrally involving low self-focus and high other-focus.

Why Humility Matters

Regardless of how it has been defined, the research conducted thus far strongly supports the view that cultivating humility is a good thing. For example, studies using the “honesty-humility” construct (measured by the HEXACO, Ashton & Lee, 2008) have found high honesty-humility to be correlated with lower rates of infidelity—and those low in honesty-humility more likely to commit moral transgressions and less likely to admit this when questioned directly (Hilbig, Moshagen, & Zettler, 2015). People high in honesty-humility displayed more cooperative behaviors and were more responsive to incentives for cooperation (Ashton & Lee, 2008; Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013). In standard economic trade games, they made more fair allocations and acted in a more cooperative fashion. And they did not behave differently depending on whether defection could be punished by the recipient or not, generally refraining from exploitation of the other – even when they had the chance to do so (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009).

Honesty-humility was also found to negatively correlate with (a) the intention to commit premeditated vengeful acts, (b) the intention to engage in immediate retaliation or displaced aggression (though more strongly with the former than the latter; Lee & Ashton, 2012), (c) right-wing authoritarianism, (d) social dominance orientation, and (e) hierarchy-oriented values (Lee, Ashton, Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Shin, 2010).

In summary, individual differences in honesty-humility are negatively related to manipulativeness, displaced aggression, vengefulness, social dominance, and other counterproductive behaviors, while being positively related to integrity, cooperation, and other morally relevant capacities (for an overview, see Ashton et al., 2004).

Other humility researchers have found similar results: For instance, Davis et al. (2011) found humility to be negatively related to a lack of forgiveness, as well as avoidance and revenge, while being positively related to empathy. And higher levels of perceived humility were related to higher perceptions of both warmth-based and conscientiousness-based virtues. Landrum (2011) similarly found humility to be moderately correlated with self-esteem and the need for achievement, as well as 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 by respect and lack of superiority toward an individual’s cultural background and experience—fosters a strong working alliance between therapists and clients. Moreover, clients’ perceptions of their therapists’ cultural humility were positively associated with their overall improvement in therapy. And, finally, Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, and Lyubomirsky (2014) found that humility and gratitude are mutually reinforcing. People who wrote a letter expressing their gratitude showed higher humility than those who performed a neutral activity and people’s baseline humility predicted the degree of gratitude felt after writing the letter. Also, humility and gratitude mutually predicted one another in people’s diary entries over time, even after controlling for the other’s prior level.

There are also a number of documented social benefits for humble people. For example, humble people tend to avoid the pitfalls of boasting and grandiose attitudes, both of which often generate negative impressions in other people (e.g., Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997). Since humility fosters cooperation, sharing, and a lack of self-preoccupation, it is also likely to foster closer ties with friends, family, and romantic partners (see Friesen, 2001). Indeed, romantic partners who had

recently been hurt in their relationships who perceived their partners as more humble were more likely to have forgiven them at a later date (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.

In our own research (Wright, Nadelhoffer, & Ross, 2015), we found our measurement of humility to be positively related to a wide range of morally relevant attributes or qualities—such as civic responsibility, gratitude, humanitarian-egalitarian attitudes, empathy, moral identity, integrity, universalistic values, benevolence, “moral foundation” intuitions (Graham & Haidt, 2009), mindfulness, conscientiousness, and the tendency to feel guilt for bad behavior and seek to repair wrong-doing. We also found that scores on our humility scale correlate with several important markers of psychological wellbeing, such as optimism, hope, achievement values, positive life-regard, secure attachment, positive growth, personal relationships, decisiveness, comfort with ambiguity, and openness to experience. It was also found to be positively related to intrinsic religiosity and faith maturity, as well as belief in free will and dualism. And it was negatively related to sadism, psychopathic tendencies, and insecure (anxious) attachment, as well as economic and social greed.

In short, many studies show a close association between humility and numerous positive attributes and character strengths, suggesting that humility is a powerfully pro-social virtue with psychological, moral, and social benefits. Indeed, elsewhere (Wright & Nadelhoffer, 2015) we argue that humility should be considered a “foundational” virtue, necessary (though not sufficient) for the full development of other virtues, and of virtuous character more generally. As such, it is definitely something worth promoting.

Promoting Humility: A Writing Therapy Approach?

Given the clear social and personal benefits of humility, are there ways that it can be promoted? Lavelock et al. (2014) tested this by administering an intervention which involved completing a 7.5 hour workbook with sixty-five “multi-modal exercises” designed to promote humility (PROVE). They found that the participants in the humility condition reported greater increases in humility across time than those in the control condition, whose pre-post humility measures did not change. Participants in the humility condition also increased in their levels of forgivingness and patience and decreased in their general negativity more than did participants in the control condition. Importantly, these findings held for both religious and non-religious individuals.

While their approach to inducing humility is both novel and noteworthy, Lavelock et al. (2014) note that their findings are preliminary and that their study has several limitations—e.g., they used a small sample of mostly women and the control condition did not require participants to complete an comparable alternative activity. From our perspective, though, the most problematic feature of this approach was their use of the 10-item Modesty/Humility (MH) subscale of the Values in Action Strengths Inventory (VIA: Peterson & Seligman, 2004) as their measurement of humility. As we pointed out earlier (and have argued in more detail elsewhere; Wright et al., 2015), the MH subscale of VIA is problematic as a measure of humility, both because its items arguably pick out modesty more than humility and because it relies on direct self-report, which makes it more likely that participants will self-enhance (or otherwise misreport).

Given this, perhaps it would be premature to count the work done by Lavelock and colleagues (2014) as evidence of a successful intervention. Nevertheless, we think that they are

on the right track. In particular, we think that the workbook approach—which draws on the rich writing therapy literature (see below)—has promise, and should be pursued.

The Semantic Signature of Humility

In order to be in a better position to design and implement writing therapy strategies for fostering humility, we thought it would help to first get a better understanding of how humble people think and write about humility—which is an issue we recently explored.

We were interested to see if people’s level of humility (as measured by our scale) would be reflected in the way they expressed themselves—for example, in how they wrote about things. To examine this, we asked a broad sample of US 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 to them 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 paradigmatic humble and non-humble passages (agreed upon by four independent coders and correlated with actual humility scores by between 78-100%), which were then compared to one another. Using log-likelihood, we examined the following features to see which were over-represented in the humble corpus relative to the non-humble corpus, and vice versa: terms, parts of speech, and semantic categories.

Doing this, we found 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, whereas the non-humble passages more frequently used “or”. Generally speaking, the humble passages used language designed to break down boundaries/hierarchies, maintain equality, and emphasize connection, whereas the non-humble passages used language intended to express skepticism, impose judgment, assert superiority, and emphasize disconnection. This suggests a clear—and relevant—difference in way people high vs. low in humility write.

This investigation was motivated by the ground-breaking therapeutic work done in computational linguistics on the self (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003) and on personal narratives (Graybeal, Sexton, & Pennebaker, 2002). In our future endeavors, we hope to build upon the extant work on writing therapy, which has been used successfully in a variety of contexts and for a number of diverse purposes. Having first shed light on how people high (or low) in humility think, write, and behave, we think the next step should be to develop interventions—and one approach we believe likely to be fruitful would be writing therapies that incorporate and promote the “semantic signature” of humility (discussed above) in order to foster its development.

Work on this front would not only extend the work on writing therapy (Pennebaker 1997; 2011), but it would also draw on the related work done on self-theories (Dweck, 1999; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Molden & Dweck, 2006). For present purposes, the most salient finding (Dweck, 1999) is that people differ about whether they believe that basic personal traits and dispositions are fixed and static (entity theory) or dynamic and fluid (incremental theory). Which self-theory a person has (or adopts) can have important downstream consequences on their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors—e.g., people who view the world as static exhibit less motivation than people who view the world more dynamically. More importantly for our

prescriptive project, self-theories can be experimentally manipulated, which in turn, has yielded improvements when it comes to motivation and moral behavior. We hope to develop writing therapy tools to induce humility and all of the positive attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors associated with humility. Given that we believe humility to be a foundational virtue—that is, a virtue that is required for the full development and expression of other virtues—we believe our approach on this front will have important downstream consequences.

Just as Dweck (1999) developed tools for shifting peoples' self-theories, our goal would be to develop writing therapy tools specifically tailored to improve humility and facilitate other virtuous behaviors—specifically, getting people to write and think in ways that align with how humble people write and think. In this respect, we also look to build upon the aforementioned work by Lavelock et al. (2014). Armed with (a) a deeper understanding of the core features of humility, (b) better tools for measuring humility, and (c) new insights into humility's semantic signature, we plan to develop a number of primes and writing assignments to induce people to write about humility—and to adopt its signature in situations where humility would most notably change one's approach to important personal and interpersonal situations (e.g., facing disagreement)—with the hope that, over time, this will lead to positive downstream attitudinal, dispositional, and behavioral consequences. There are a number of populations for which this sort of intervention would be particularly important—for example, “at-risk” youth (both in the general population and inside juvenile detention facilities), adult prisoners, as well as individuals struggling with addictions and symptoms of trauma (in the sense that it may help to promote forgiveness, healing, and post-traumatic growth; Powers et al., 2007; Ting & Watson, 2007).

Moral Virtue vs. Epistemic Virtue

Since this is a part of a special edition on intellectual humility, it is important to briefly

address the connections between humility as a *moral* virtue, versus an *epistemic* one. Our focus here, was on the former—yet, our account nonetheless has implications for the latter. In particular, our requirement of epistemic alignment (and its operationalized dimension of low self-focus)—of experiencing oneself as a finite and fallible being whose perspective is vastly limited and incomplete, and whose place in the universe is infinitesimally small—is arguably the *foundation* for the development of intellectual humility for two separate, but related, reasons. First, this experience makes it difficult to privilege your own beliefs, ideas, theories, etc. over others—i.e., to scrutinize them less carefully and grant them more weight without warrant than the beliefs, ideas, and theories of others. Second, this experience diffuses the egoistic drive that would make one feel compelled to do so in the first place.

Taking Stock: Concluding Remarks

In our efforts to identify and investigate the core features of humility, we adopted a multi-layered approach. Our overall goal was mostly descriptive. We developed a self-report scale, explored the folk concept of humility (in both youth and adult samples), and looked for correlations (positive and negative) between humility and other beliefs, attributes, and behaviors. And we used textual analysis to detect a kind of semantic signature of humility in participants' writing samples. At each step of the way, our aim was to shed light on what we took to stand at the core of humility—an epistemically and ethically aligned psychological positioning of the self (operationalized as the dual dimensions of low self-focus and high other-focus). We hope that others find the fruits of our labors on these fronts to be illuminating.

Moving forward, our hope is to utilize these insights to help promote the development and expression of this important virtue. One approach, discussed above, will be the development of new writing therapy tools for fostering and promoting humility in children, adolescents, and

adults. Given what we have already learned about the interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits that are associated with low self-focus and high other-focus, there is reason to think that even a little more humility in the world could go an awful long way to making the world a morally better place.

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