**Humility as a Foundational Virtue**

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**ABSTRACT**: We each stand, phenomenologically speaking, at the center of the universe. This inherent “centered-ness” biases our experience of our own needs, desires, interests, beliefs, goals, and values as being more immediate and urgent than those of others’, manifesting in a natural self-orientation and absorption that leads us to problematically privilege, prioritize, and favor ourselves. The central thesis presented here is that the interfering and distorting influences that arise from our “default setting” are most effectively combated, thwarted, quieted—and ultimately silenced—through the cultivation of humility. And further, that humility (as defined by Nadelhoffer & Wright, 2017) should be considered a *foundational* virtue, necessary for the full development and exercise of other virtues, and maturely virtuous character.

KEYWORDS: humility, foundational virtue, low self-focus, high other-focus, epistemic and ethical alignment

**Introduction**

The truly ethical life is a life in which you encounter yourself as one person among others, all equally real. This means that the legitimate interests of others, insofar as you can anticipate them, will figure on a par with your own legitimate interests in your practical reasoning…For you will find yourself to be only one of the others, the one you happen to know so much about, thanks to being him or her. (Johnston, 2009, p. 89-90)

The maturely virtuous person—someone who truly embodies the above quote; who is fully attuned and responsive to the needs and interests of others and who experiences them as being as real, legitimate, andas pressing as her own—represents a rare and difficult accomplishment.

As many have noted (and as we all ourselves experience) each of us stands, phenomenologically speaking, at the center of the universe. We experience ourselves as the organizing center, not only of a consciousness, but of a consciousness woven together into the form of a life; *our* life. We experience that life as real and substantial, as somethingto be lived. Indeed, we experience it as something that *must* be lived—i.e., it comes equipped with a built-in mandate to fulfill certain basic needs and to pursue certain conceptions of the good. And thus naturally, even though we live in a world filled with needs, it is only a fairly narrow subset (namely, our own) with which we are most intimately familiar and most readily encounter, that press most strongly in upon us and demand our attention. Similarly, though there are many different conceptions of the good, it is naturally our own that strikes us as the most attractive and compelling, the most “true” and worthy of pursuit.

Through this inherent “centered-ness” of the first-person, we experience the gravitational pull of our needs, desires, interests, beliefs, goals, and values much more immediately, continuously, and urgently than we experience those of others’. This manifests as a powerful self-orientation and absorption (what Johnston, 2009 calls “self-involvement” or “self-worship”) through which we privilege, prioritize, and favor—in terms of the energy we expend, the thought we give, the resources we dedicate, and the time we allocate—those needs, desires, interests, beliefs, goals, and values. And we do so not only because they are the ones we happen to know best, but also because they emanate from that center. They, and not others, are *ours*.

As David Foster Wallace stated in a commencement speech he gave:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness…it is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. (Wallace, 2005)

And this is not a “default setting” that is easy to change—especially when most of us live in a culture that, as Wallace (2005) also notes:

…will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self.

This is what makes the maturely virtuous person’s transcendence of the default setting one of her most central—and striking—accomplishments. She is able to escape the centripetal force of her own natural self-orientation, and the biases that arise from it, and is thus able to become a genuine sister to all of humanity.

Such people have discovered, in Wallace’s (2005) words:

The really important kind of freedom [that] involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in a myriad of petty, unsexy ways every day.

And we see this sort of extended commitment to, and communion with, others clearly demonstrated in the lives of maturely virtuous people. They experience everyone they encounter as having a dignity equal to their own. As Brooks (2015) writes, such exemplars see “…the soul of a drug-addled homeless person [as] just as invaluable as the most laudable high achiever” (96). And it is this experience of a deep and abiding connection to, kinship with, and responsibility for, others that enables the maturely virtuous to dedicate themselves to helping others—saving lives, addressing injustices, feeding the hungry, tending to the sick, and protecting the weak, vulnerable, and oppressed—often with sacrifice and at great potential risk to themselves (Brooks, 2015; Colby & Damon, 1992; Monroe, 2004, 2012; Oliner, 2003; Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

How does this sort of transformation, this transcendence of our default setting, happen? In this chapter, we will argue that the core catalyst for this transformation, and for the capacity for maturely virtuous engagement more generally, is humility. Further, we will argue that humility—as presented here (and argued for elsewhere; see Nadelhoffer & Wright, 2017; Nadelhoffer, Wright, Echols, Perini, & Venezia, 2017; Wright, Nadelhoffer, Perini, Langville, Echols, & Venezia, 2017; Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2018)—should be considered a *foundational* virtue, necessary for the full development and exercise of other virtues, and maturely virtuous character.

**First, A Few Words about Virtue**

It is not the purpose of this chapter to argue for any particular account of virtue—nor is this discussion of the maturely virtuous meant to presume one, except to say that it strongly leans towards some sort of neo-Aristotelian account. Regardless, whatever your preferred account of virtue, it seems relatively uncontroversial to say that the *maturely* virtuous person is someone who is not only typically able to ascertain and do what is called for, ethically speaking, in a given situation, but that she is also typically able to do so appropriately—in the right way, at the right time, and with the right sorts of underlying motivations (see, for example, Annas 2011; Hursthouse, 1999; 2016; Snow, 2010).[[1]](#endnote-1) That is to say, the maturely virtuous person stands in the appropriate relation to the situation to which she is responding, and is always “…striving for improvement in relation to the right objects, in the right manner, with the right emotions, to the right extent, and so on” (Swanton, 2016, p. 129).

When asked how it is possible for the maturely virtuous person to accomplish this, many (though certainly not all) virtue ethicists point to practical reasoning, wisdom, or intelligence—a host of interrelated cognitive and affective capacities which allow the maturely virtuous person to accurately identify and evaluate the relevant information and arrive at the appropriate decision about what is required in response to this information (Annas 2011; Hursthouse, 1999; 2016; Russell, 2009, 2013; Snow, 2010). And while we agree that such cognitive and affective capacities—developed, honed, and fine-tuned over years of experience—are critical for maturely virtuous engagement, we nonetheless want to make the case for the central importance of something arguably more basic.

Being able to do all the things required for maturely virtuous engagement (i.e., identifying and evaluating the relevant information, deciding what to do, and then in addition, successfully implementing that decision without undue internal interference) requires that the maturely virtuous person be able to cognitively and affectively *experience* and *appreciate* the actual significance—the “weight”, as it were—of the many different features of the situation, many of which are not her own and/or are external to her, that contribute to the determination of the appropriate response in a given instance. This requires, at its foundation, the absence—or at least the temporary “quieting”—of interfering and distorting influences.

Central among these interfering and distorting influences are those that arise from the natural “centered-ness” of our phenomenological and psychological constitution. While certainly not the source of *everything* that has the potential to throw a person trying to do the right thing off the mark, many interfering and distorting influences originate from this source and they are arguably often the most powerful (while often also subtle) influences. Being ever-present, they are also the most likely to continuously warp perception and cloud judgment, interfering with a person’s efforts to act appropriately. And they can be particularly pernicious when it comes to the development of mature virtue because they operate (as David Foster Wallace rightly noted) as part of our built-in programming, making them notoriously hard to detect and/or dismantle.

As Brooks (2015) observed about the maturely virtuous, through the various experiences they had and hardships they endured,

…they learned to quiet the self. Only by quieting the self could they see the world clearly. Only by quieting the self could they understand other people and accept what they were offering. When they had quieted themselves, they had opened up space for grace to flood in. (p. 13)

Similarly, it is our central thesis that the interfering and distorting influences that arise from our default setting are most effectively (and perhaps only truly) combated, thwarted, quieted—and ultimately silenced—through the cultivation of humility. This is why we view it as the core catalyst for the transformation undergone by the maturely virtuous discussed above. It is also, as we will argue, why humility should be considered a foundational virtue, necessary for the full development and exercise of all other virtues, and mature virtuous character.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Now, Back to Humility**

There is massive consensus across the major religions, that salvation crucially requires overcoming the centripetal force of self-involvement, in order to *orient one’s life around reality* and *the real needs of human beings as such*. Given the strength of the centripetal force, it is too easy to invent objects of worship that instead serve as echo chambers for our individual self-worship. (Johnston, 2009, p. 23-24, emphasis ours)

What the above quote suggests is that the centripetal force of our natural centered-ness is a source of both *epistemic* and *ethical* distortion—it interferes with our ability to accurately perceive, and fully engage with, both objective reality and the wellbeing of the other living beings around us.

According to our account of humility, which we have developed and defended at length elsewhere (Nadelhoffer & Wright, 2017; Nadelhoffer, et al., 2017; Wright, et al., 2017, 2018), humility is an *epistemically* and *ethically aligned state of awareness*. Put another way, humility is a state of awareness in which the distortions mentioned above have been (even if only temporarily) eliminated; a state of awareness free of the epistemic and ethical biases generated by our natural centered-ness.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Humility is a state in which we experience *ourselves* in true relation to *all else* (everything and everyone)—allowing us to experience those relations, and their objects, objectively. And while, as a state of awareness, humility is something we can “come into and go out of” (i.e., we can be temporarily or momentarily humble), the *virtue* of humility requires these states of awareness to stabilize into a sort of “standing” or baseline disposition (or trait), such that our cognition, affect, and behavior is continuously informed and influenced by it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Let us break this down further. By “epistemically aligned”, we mean that humility *orients us towards reality*, enabling us to understand and experience ourselves—and all to which we stand in relation—objectively.

Humility…entails an unvarnished and honest assessment of who you are. Without this accurate self-awareness, nothing else in your inner life will come into focus in its true measure. (Morinis, 2007, p. 46; also this volume)

Among other things, it is the experience of ourselves within the context of our full existence, generating a clear and accurate sense of ourselves as finite, fragile, and imperfect beings, contingent and relationally constituted—and yet, part of a vast, complex, and interconnected universe of living beings. As Johnston (2009) mentions, this can be experienced spiritually, as a connection to the Divine or some higher force or power, but it can also be experienced more secularly, through an awareness of one’s place in, and connection to, the larger natural/cosmic order.

Humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos. Humility is awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness…an awareness that your individual talents alone are inadequate to the tasks that have been assigned to you. Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order. (Brooks, 2015, p. 263)

By “ethically aligned”, we mean that humility *orients us towards others*, enabling us to truly understand and experience the *“all else”—*e.g., the vast web of interconnected beings whose needs and interests are as morally relevant, as worthy of attention and concern, as our own.

In a discussion on the value of Buddhist meditative practice for virtuous engagement, Flanagan (2015) states of an advanced practitioner that, if questioned about why she has worked so hard to orient her life towards compassion and loving-kindness for all beings, she might reply,

I saw that my egoism leads to suffering, I saw that I am impermanent, dependently originating, no-self, empty, and part of the flux; this much made me open to feeling my solidarity with all beings who suffer, I began to comprehend myself as less bounded; I started to see my fate as a shared fate; and then I felt it—my solidarity, the calling. (p. 187)

In other words, ethical alignment is experienced as the expansion, *not* the contraction, of the force and scope of our own needs and interests. This is because they become interwoven with the needs and interests of others, and as such are no longer experienced as separate, in conflict, and/or in competition, but rather as inextricably and necessarily connected and shared. By experiencing this deep investment in the lives and wellbeing of others, rather than being merely absorbed with the satisfaction of our own needs and interests, we experience ourselves as grounded by and embedded in, supporting and supported by, the larger living world. Our fates become a shared fate.

Humility is associated with spiritual perfection. When humility effects depression it is defective; when it is genuine it inspires joy, courage, and inner dignity. (Morinis, 2007, p. 46)

In other words, the quieting of the interfering and distorting biases generated by our natural centered-ness—rather than leading to a sense of alienation or “existential anxiety”—results in a feeling of deep connection and fellow-concern. We experience ourselves not simply *as less* than our natural centered-ness would have us believe, but also *as more*.

**Humility as Foundational**

*Humility is the solid foundation for all virtues*. – Confucius

# *All virtues and duties depend on humility*. – *Duties of the Heart*, Bachya ibn Paquda (1996 translation)

*Humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation, and bond of all virtues*. – John Chrysostom[[5]](#endnote-5)

*Humility “is the base and foundation of all virtues, and without it no other virtue can exist”* – *Don Quixote*, Cervantes (2004/1613, p. 30)

Thus far, we have made two related claims. The first is that humility is necessary for maturely virtuous engagement because the interfering and distorting influences that arise from the natural “centered-ness” of our “default setting” are most effectively combated, thwarted, quieted—and ultimately silenced—through the cultivation of humility. The second is that humility is necessary for the full development and exercise of other virtues and mature virtuous character. Let us consider each claim in turn.

With respect to the first claim, here is the groundwork we have laid thus far:

First, we have asserted that maturely virtuous engagement requires typically being able to both ascertain and do what is called for, ethically speaking, in a way that is fully appreciative of the morally relevant features and in sync with the situation (e.g., manner and timing). More specifically, this means that maturely virtuous engagement requires that we be able to perceive, identify, understand, and properly evaluate the significance of the facts with respect to what we ought (or ought not) do.[[6]](#endnote-6) What is more, maturely virtuous engagement requires that we be able to properly weigh the needs, desires, interests, beliefs, goals, and values of all relevant others in determining what we ought (or ought not) do. And finally that, in determining what we ought (or ought not) do, we be able to carry it out without unnecessary internal conflict or “corruption”.

We have also argued that accomplishing all of this requires, at its base, a quieting of the interfering and distorting biases that arise from the natural centered-ness. In other words, it requires a state of awareness that is *epistemically* and *ethically aligned*—which, according to our account, is humility.

Humility’s epistemic alignment orients us towards reality, allowing us to understand and experience ourselves and the world around us as they are.[[7]](#endnote-7) Humility’s ethical alignmentorients towards others, allowing us to understand and experience ourselves as only one among a host of other morally relevant beings, whose interests are as real, legitimate, and as worthy of attention and concern as our own. Together, they eliminate the many centered-ness generated biases that distort and/or otherwise interfere with our ability to perceive, identify, understand, and properly evaluate the significance of the facts, as well as to properly weigh the needs, desires, interests, beliefs, goals, and values of others, in determining what we ought (or ought not) do. They also silence the internal conflict or “corruption”[[8]](#endnote-8) that would otherwise interfere with us acting on those determinations.

*Therefore, humility is necessary for maturely virtuous engagement.*

Of course, all of this presumes our account of humility, which you may or may not wish to adopt. Thus, we should take a moment to consider our account against the backdrop of other accounts. But first, let us consider our second claim—that humility is necessary for the full development and exercise of other virtues (and mature virtuous character).

While related to our first claim, this is nonetheless a different claim. And it is important at the outset to note that by it we are not just making the claim that humility is an essential virtue to have, along with other virtues (such as courage, honesty, generosity, kindness, patience, and so on), in order to be a maturely virtuous person. The claim is, rather, a stronger one: that humility is necessary for the full (mature) developmentand exercise of these other virtues.

While a full defense of this claim is beyond the scope of this chapter, we can at least outline what we take to be some points in its favor. To start, it seems reasonable to assume that our natural centered-ness, and the many biases that arise from it, would actively work against the manifestation of the other virtues (e.g., courage, honesty, generosity, kindness, patience, and others)—except in those instances where their expression was in line with our own needs, desires, interests, beliefs, goals, and values; where it somehow behooved or otherwise benefitted us.

Consider those, for example, who take risks to save others because they enjoy the thrill of the physical challenge and the admiration of their community. This doesn’t mean that the sort of heroism we admire in them (even though, when off duty, they may be arrogant, self-inflated, irresponsible, and/or entitled) isn’t courage—but it isn’t *mature* courage. That is, it is not the expression of a virtue that has become fully attuned to what is called for, ethically speaking, in a wide range of situations. There are many instances outside this particular context (risking one’s life to save others) where courage might be required, yet these individuals may be unable to ascertain this and/or act on it, especially when the type of courageous expression required is different from the one to which they have become accustomed. More, insofar as their particular expression of courage as has been enlisted into the psychological service of self-admiration and inflated social egos (the need for which may indicate virtue-relevant damage to private egos), it is likely to be thrown off its mark whenever the biases generated by their self-orientation and absorption are activated.

Or consider honesty. It may be that honesty comes fairly easily, generally speaking. For most of us, it typically only becomes difficult when it puts our needs and interests at risk, or otherwise interferes with them. But, when those situations arise, it becomes challenging to properly adjudicate between our own needs and interests and those of the individual(s) with whom we are failing to be truthful. Our own needs and interests tend to weigh in much more heavily—even (or perhaps, especially) when it is clear that what we are hiding, or otherwise failing to reveal, reflects poorly upon us and that hiding it is wrong. This makes the silencing of the biases generated by our self-orientation and absorption critical. It allows us to more accurately perform (though it is often more experiential than performative) the “moral calculus” that weighs in favor of our honesty. Among other things, we are able to more clearly appreciate the dignity of the other, whom we harm by not giving her all the facts relevant to her choices and decision-making.

This same kind of story can be told for the other virtues as well—while some partially developed expression of them is possible without humility, in its absence they cannot become mature. Humility is necessary to fully eliminate our self-oriented tendency to view others as inferior, and therefore worthy of scorn and disregard, or unworthy of compassion, kindness, and concern. When considering who should benefit from our time, energy, and resources, humility is necessary to bring the needs of others clearly into view, to generate the grateful joy of being able to generously contribute to their wellbeing—they who, through luck of circumstance, may have less than we do. Humility quiets the incessant push and pull of our desires, wishes, and fears, facilitating and deepening our capacity for patience, moderation, and modesty. And so on.

It is also worth mentioning here that humility has another critical role to play in the development of mature virtue—namely, *the reduction, and eventual elimination, of vice.* As Roberts & Wood (2007; see also Roberts & Spezio, in this volume) note, the defining feature of the humble person is that she lacks the many vices of pride. And as Leary & Banker (in this volume) argue, beyond the various accolades and benefits that come from their demonstrated skills and talents, the humble person feels no need to receive special treatment, to be looked upon as more worthy or of more value than others—in fact, such behavior would arguably be repugnant to her. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a vice (though one certainly may exist) that does not have as its genesis our natural tendency towards self-absorption and self-worship.[[9]](#endnote-9)

As such, it makes sense to view humility as residing at the center of the maturely virtuous character. Interestingly, it also suggests (and seems likely given the accounts we have reviewed—see for example, Brooks, 2015; Colby & Damon, 1992; Monroe, 2004, 2012; Oliner, 2003; Oliner & Oliner, 1988) that while moral exemplars differ in many respects from one another, the one virtue they all share—the virtue that stands at the center of the unique moral contributions they have made to their communities and humanity at large—is humility.

**But, Why Our Account?**

We return to the question posed earlier: Why our account of humility? Would other accounts of humility agree with us that it occupies such a privileged position with respect to mature virtue?

First, let us say at the outset that we reject the “self-abnegation” or “lowliness” accounts of humility that can be found in some philosophical and theological approaches (see Nadelhoffer, et al., 2017 for our more extended discussion of this view). This approach aside, over the years humility has received a lot of attention from philosophers and psychologists, who have argued for accounts of humility that encompass a range of inter-related intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities.

Some have defined humility largely in terms of a particular *self-orientation*. For example, Tangney (2000, 2009) identified humility as an accurate assessment of one's talents and achievements, the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations, along with openness to new ideas, contradictory information, advice, and an appreciation of the value of other people and things. And others have defined humility along similar lines, such as having a moderate or accurate view of oneself (Baumeister & Exline, 2002; Emmons, 1999; Rowatt, Ottenbreit, Nesselroade, & Cunningham, 2002; Sandage, Wiens, & Dahl, 2001), a willingness to admit mistakes, seek new information, and learn new things (Hwang, 1982; Templeton, 1997), an openness to new or divergent ideas (Gantt, 1976; Harrell & Bond, 2006; Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005; Neuringer, 1991; Templeton, 1995), as well as a relative lack of self-preoccupation, desire to distort information, or otherwise “self-enhance” or make oneself look and feel better (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Templeton, 1997).

Others have defined humility more in terms of what we might call an *other-orientation*, such as the presence of empathy, gentleness, respect, and an appreciation for the equality, autonomy, and value of others (Halling, Kunz, & Rowe, 1994; Means, Wilson, Sturm, Bion, & Bach, 1990; Sandage, 1999; Tangney, 2000, 2009), as well as a concern for their welfare (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012). Also, gratitude (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005), and a willingness to share credit for accomplishments with others (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004), as well as a willingness to surrender to God or some transcendent power (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Murray, 2001; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007).

As we have discussed at length elsewhere (Wright, et al., 2017, 2018), one problem with defining humility merely in terms of these (and other) qualities is that it is not clear which of them *constitute* humility and which are simply *related to* it (see Leary & Banker, this volume, for a similar argument). 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. One of the major advantages of our account of humility is that it illuminates its core—i.e., a state of awareness that is free of the epistemically and ethically interfering and distorting biases generated by our natural centered-ness—and thus explains the presence of these intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities.

Davis, Worthington, Hook, Emmons, Hill, & Burnette (2012; see also Mosher, Hook, Davis, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, this volume) take a different approach, proposing that the humility of an individual can only be identified via interpersonal judgmentsthat others in relationship to that individual make about him/her. And typically we attribute humility to that individual via the attribution of other capacities or qualities, 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.

While a novel approach that helps to address certain worries (see Wright, et al., 2017 for more discussion), it nonetheless collapses back into the other accounts, which define humility in terms of positive personal and interpersonal attributes or qualities possessed by an individual.

Leary and Banker (this volume) provide yet another account of humility, which is that:

Humility involves the recognition that, however great one’s personal accomplishments or positive characteristics may be, one is not fundamentally a more special person because of them and, thus, should not be viewed or treated as special outside the domain of one’s accomplishments or characteristics (and sometimes even within it) (p. FILL IN).

While we think this account has a lot to offer—namely, it identifies one of the central outcomes of an epistemically and ethically aligned state of awareness—the concern we have for this account is the same as above. After all, one could ask of the humble person *why* she understands that she is not fundamentally any more special than anyone else given her accomplishments. And it seems to us that the answer would have to reference something like our account of humility. In other words, we would argue the humble person recognizes her lack of specialness *because* she is in a (temporary or stable) state of epistemically and ethically aligned awareness—it is the state of awareness that generates, or makes possible, this recognition.

Another interesting approach to humility is to view it largely in terms of its “negative character”—i.e., in terms of what it is *not*. As Roberts & Wood (2007) write,

Humility is opposite a number of vices, including arrogance, vanity, conceit, egotism, grandiosity, pretentiousness, snobbishness, impertinence (presumption), haughtiness, self-righteousness, domination, selfish ambition, and self-complacency. Despite differing from one another in various ways, these vices are all opposites of humility, and therefore definitive of it; we might sum up all of them as ‘improper pride’. (p. 258)

According to this view, humility, rather than being a virtue, is an *absence of vice*. Nonetheless, this account harmonizes with our own in a number of ways. First, our view of humility also involves an absence—namely, the absence of interfering and distorting epistemic and ethical biases generated by our natural centered-ness. Second, the biases that we argue humility is free from are precisely the sorts of biases Roberts & Woods (2007) mention in the quote above—all forms of “improper pride”. While we would argue that this is not the only form that these biases take, nor the only way that self-orientation and absorption can distort our epistemic and ethical capacities, their idea of improper pride nonetheless captures a good portion of the sorts of distortions we have in mind.

And this leads to exactly the sort of epistemically and ethically relevant clarity we have argued for. For example, they write,

The humble person is not ignorant of her value or status, but unconcerned about it and therefore inattentive to it. She may appear to be ignorant of her excellence or status, but if she needs to assess herself she can give as accurate an account as the next person; she is just not very interested in such an assessment, thus not much inclined to inquire about it, and the evidence for it is not particularly salient for her. (p. 261)

This is not to say that, in their estimation, an absence of vice cannot *become* a virtue. But for humility to be a virtue, Roberts & Wood (2007) argue that we must be able to show how any given expression of it (say, for example, as a lack of concern for status) has an underlying virtuous motive—or, as they write, “We propose that the concern for status is swamped or displaced or put on hold by some overriding virtuous concern” (p. 261), such that the person’s humility becomes “…coordinated with an intense concern for some apparent good” (p. 263).

Here, we disagree with Roberts & Woods (2007) on two points. First, we would argue that the epistemic and ethical alignment we both appear to agree humility provides is more than a mere absence of vice—it is *itself* an important good. Second, it also seems natural for such an alignment, an absence of bias (or vice), to become coordinated with, and to coordinate, a variety of other goods. For instance, as Roberts & Woods themselves mention, “…a disposition to rejoice in the progress of one’s students, especially, perhaps, when they advance beyond oneself; and…an emotional indifference to the question of the extent of one’s own influence on them” (p. 264-265) or a deep, abiding concern for, and joy in, the flourishing of other living beings.

But, perhaps this is not really a disagreement after all. Our argument is that humility is necessary for maturely virtuous engagement and for the full development of other virtues and virtuous character—but that does not mean that it is sufficient.[[10]](#endnote-10) This is partly because being in an epistemically and ethically aligned state of awareness does not *by itself* afford you the range of experiences and opportunities to practice that are clearly required for becoming maturely virtuous. But we must also grant that—as Roberts & Woods (2007) point out—it is possible, however unlikely, that a person could experience epistemically and ethically aligned states of awareness and yet somehow be cognitively and/or affectively disconnected from them in such a way as to feel no inclination to act or otherwise respond accordingly. Though we tend to agree with Morinis (2007) that such a state of humility would be a *defective* state of humility, and that genuine humility naturally produces and contributes to a variety of epistemically and ethically virtuous outcomes, a more thorough argument for this would need to be given.

In summary, we view our account of humility as having at least two key advantages over other accounts: First, it clearly illuminates the underlying phenomenological and psychological features of humility such that it (typically) gives rise to the host of intrapersonal and interpersonal, self-oriented, other-oriented, and relational attributes, qualities, and capacities widely discussed by philosophers and psychologists. In other words, it clarifies *why* humble people are more self-aware and accurate in their self-assessment, are mindful of their limitations and fallibility, are open to new information and ideas, are comfortable with both success and failure (and are not inclined to lord the former over, or hide the latter from, others), are modest in their bearing, are compassionate and inclined to care for others, are generous, grateful, and loving. And so on.

Secondly, in so doing, it also clearly illuminates the fundamental importance and value of humility, both as a virtue in its own right and more—as the medium through which virtues develop and mature and vices wither and die; the foundation upon which maturely virtuous character is built.

**Cultivating Humility**

If humility is foundational in the way we have been arguing, then it is important to know how to cultivate it. But how do we do that? The other chapters in the volume have a lot to offer in this topic. For example, Narvaez (this volume) argues powerfully for the importance of early life experiences—of experiencing “limbic resonance”, and developing a healthy sense of both autonomy and belonging through secure attachment, with caregivers and community members.

Both Roberts & Spezio (this volume) and DeVries (this volume) talk about the importance of immersing oneself in what we might call “deep caregiving”—in the former case, through the L’Arche communities with people with disabilities and in the latter case, through hospice—where we encounter our own finitude, fragility, and helplessness in the unalterable and unavoidable vulnerability and suffering of others. These circumstances require us to submit to that which is beyond our capacity to change, repair, or solve; or even fully understand. In them, we encounter the edges of our skills and abilities and experience the vast expanse beyond them, what remains unknown, unexplored, unrealized—and yet, nonetheless, a part of us. In response to this, we must give ourselves up to simply loving what is in front of us, without needing to change or “fix” it; to a “…selfless respect for reality” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 93).

Johnston (2009) articulated something similar when he wrote:

There are large-scale defects in human life that no amount of psychological adjustment or practical success can free us from. These include arbitrary suffering, aging (once it has reached the corrosive stage), our profound ignorance of our condition, the isolation of ordinary self-involvement, the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and, finally, to untimely death…The redeemed life is a form of life in which we are reconciled to these large-scale defects of ordinary life…the idea [that] even in the face of such things there must be a way to go on, keeping faith in the importance of goodness, and an openness to love. (p. 15-16)

Others have spoken of various spiritual practices through which we can cultivate humility. Morinis (this volume, see also Morinis, 2007) discusses the tradition of virtue-cultivation in the Jewish faith, called Mussar, which dates back to the 10th century, and places the cultivation of humility (*anavah*) at the heart of one’s spiritual practice. Here the goal is to learn to *occupy one’s rightful space*—“limiting oneself to an appropriate space while leaving room for others” (Morinis, 2007, p. 49). Of course, it is important to recognize that humility works both ways (as other authors in this volume have pointed out)—it is a sort of “mean” between extremes. So, you must learn, through daily practice, to not only limit yourself to the appropriate space, but also to *fully occupy* the appropriate space:

Arrogance has an insatiable appetite for space. It claims. It occupies. It sprawls. It suffocates others. Every statement in its voice begins with “I”. The opposite extreme is self-debasement. Shrinking from occupying any space whatsoever, it retracts meekly inside itself. Its statements would never dare to begin with “I”, although, in fact, if we listen carefully, they all do, because, whether we see ourselves as nothing or as everything, we are still preoccupied with the self, and both of these traits are, therefore, forms of narcissism. (p. 50)

Sometimes, according to Morinis (this volume, see also 2007), learning the boundaries of one’s “appropriate space” requires a *humbling* experience—when we are thrown back upon ourselves, shamed for our presumption, or (alternatively) reminded of our responsibility, which we may have shirked, to ourselves and others.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Turning once again to Flanagan’s (2015) discussion of Buddhist meditative practices, he argues that meditation facilitates virtue development (and we would argue, the development of humility, in particular) because the dissolution of the self that occurs during advanced meditative practices—where we come to recognize that we are not “substantial” entities, but are instead “relationally constituted”*,* and thus all similarly suffer “…the slings and arrows, as well as the pleasures and treasures, of the unfolding” (p. 180)—generates within us a fundamental shift in orientation. We care less about ourselves and more about others.

He then argues further that:

What one grasps in the work of meditation, what one experiences, is a calling—something akin to an overpowering desire, which…one sees no reason to refuse. One has already both understood and seen that we are all interrelated, that my good is tied up with the good of all other creatures, my ego’s guard is down (and it is down for principled reasons), and I am called upon to attend to the suffering of all sentient beings. (p. 187)

At a more secular level, people argue that humility can be cultivated through experiences of awe (Gerber, 2002; Lee, 1994; Stellar, Gordon, Anderson, Piff, McNeil, & Keltner, 2018, including this volume)—experiences where we encounter the full impact of our smallness, such as seeing the earth from space, as one tiny blue dot in the vastness of the universe, or standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, or where we encounter the wondrous beauty of the natural world and of the other beings living in it.

What these many paths to humility seem to have in common is an experience: the (sometimes temporary) revelatory encounter with—and the shifting, even the shattering, of—our natural centered-ness. The experience of being knocked off balance, out of a state of self-absorption, so that we can be fully present with the world, others, and ourselves as we are. And with this comes the (again, sometimes fleeting) realization of that we are, as individuals, only fragments of a whole, existing in an imperfect world that we did not make or choose, beset by undefeatable difficulties and insurmountable odds. And yet, in precisely these moments, we cannot help but love it, ourselves, and others—the beauty of our imperfection, the grace of our suffering, the indescribable joy of being alive.

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1. ENDNOTES

   Points of clarification: First, while ideally the maturely virtuous person is able to respond appropriately across all ethical contexts, more realistically they are able to exercise their mature virtue in more circumscribed situations—which may be because certain virtues in their character have been more fully developed than others. Second, while we hold that one’s underlying motivational structure is an essential part of maturely virtuous engagement, this is not to say that it has to all or always be consciously accessible. People may respond in the right way to the right features of their environment for the right reasons while not being fully aware of the fact that they are doing so, especially once—through years of experience—such responding becomes automatic/habitual. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We also find ourselves tempted by the stronger claim that humility is sufficient for the full development of (at least some) virtues and virtuous character, at least under normal developmental circumstances. It would certainly seem more than a little odd, given our account, for a person to have cultivated the stable trait of humility and yet not have also developed other mature virtues. The state of humility that we describe seems like precisely the right sort of medium within which other virtues would naturally develop, in the absence of certain constraints and/or barriers. That said, there are several reasons why we do not think we can make this claim—see our discussion about Roberts & Woods’ (2007) view below for further discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This is similar to what Leary and colleagues call “hypo-egoic” states (a “quieting” of the self), which result in a shift in awareness *away* from oneself and *towards* other things (Leary & Terry, 2012), increased self-regulation (Leary, Adams, & Tate, 2006), a sense of being connected to something larger, and optimal functioning/well-being (Leary & Guadango, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. We are not the only ones to make this distinction between state and trait humility. For other discussions see (Kruse, Chancellor, & Lyubomirsky, 2017, including Leary & Banker, this volume). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As cited in Tarrants (2011), *Pride and Humility,* Retrieved from: http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm\_send/890. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Similarly, mature epistemic virtue requires the person to be able to, perceive, identify, understand, and properly evaluate the significance of the facts with respect to what she ought (or ought not) believe. Though outside the scope of this paper, we think humility is foundational in this respect as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This is not to say that we suddenly become omniscient. Rather, it is to say that we are able to encounter the objects of our awareness as they are, without the distortion of the egoic biases that normally interfere with our ability to experience, evaluate, and understand them clearly. The humble person is still saddled with the same physical and cognitive limitations that come with being human (something they are also clearly aware of). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. At least, those that are centered-ness generated. It is conceivable that other forms of conflict and/or corruption could exist. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This is not to say that all people who are not humble are vicious, at least not in any robust sense. As we’ve argued, the default setting of our centered-ness takes on the form of natural self-preoccupation, a self-favoring attitude and inclination that, while certainly not exemplary, is not necessarily actively thwarting, nor indifferent to, the needs and wellbeing of others. It is merely inattentive to them. In this form it is a mild form of vice at most. But this default setting is also vulnerable to further distortion—e.g., narcissism, greed, arrogance, cruelty, megalomania, deception. We might go so far as to say that just as humility is a medium conducive to virtue, our default setting is a medium conducive to vice. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Though see endnote 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Relatedly, in a study with 5th-12th graders, we found a common tendency to reference negative attributes for the humble person, increasingly so the younger they were (highest in 5-6th graders at 56%, lowest in 11-12th graders at 10%). In Nadelhoffer et al. (2017), we suggested that this might be because our earliest introductions to humility can be negative—being “put in our place,” shamed for being selfish or a braggart, and so forth. And while we did not find much evidence for this in our adult sample (only 2%), we did find that a small percentage (5%) made reference to some form of embarrassment or humiliation being present in their past personal experiences of humility. Collectively, this suggests that one road to becoming humble is *being humbled*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)