

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

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

—Robert A. Emmons (1998, p. 33)

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

For these and related reasons, philosophers and psychologists have found humility puzzling and problematic. It is one thing to insist that humility requires us to understand our proper place and to focus more on others than we focus on ourselves. It is another thing altogether to insist that we view ourselves as inherently corrupted, vile, and wretched—as some prominent theologians have suggested. Given the more extreme conceptions of humility, it is no wonder that many philosophers have dismissed humility. Nor should we be surprised by how little it has been empirically studied.

But before we pass judgment on humility (whether positive or negative), we must first decide what we take it to be (and not to be). Whether we follow St. Thomas Aquinas (1274/1972) and others in defining humility as “self-abasement to the lowest place” (*Summa Theologiae* [ST], II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 2) or instead define it more innocuously as the capacity to keep one's accomplishments and self-worth in perspective, this initial definition will influence what we conclude about the nature and value of humility.

This problem is not just a tempest in a philosophical teapot—it is critical to the empirical study of humility as well.

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

While these concerns about humility must be taken seriously, we think there is nonetheless a philosophically respectable and empirically tractable model of humility worth considering. By way of explanation, we will present our account (in the section “Our Own Positive Account of Humility”) of the twin dimensions of humility—namely, (1) *low self-focus*, that is, being hypo-egoistically decentered and aware of one’s place in the grander scheme of things, and (2) *high other-focus*, that is, being attuned to the needs and interests of others and sensitive to the fact that others have moral standing, which requires our respect and attention.

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



Finally, in the “Humility as a Foundational Virtue?” section, we will briefly discuss the possibility that humility is a foundational or metavirtue—that humility may be a “gateway” virtue, necessary for the acquisition and/or full development of other virtues. On this view, unless and until an individual is sufficiently humble, he or she is not in the proper epistemic and ethical position to behave in ways that are morally mature—the individual is not fully virtuous. Having gestured at this possibility—which is an idea we are developing more fully elsewhere—we conclude by setting the stage for future work in humility research.

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

The Philosophy of Humility

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

This conception of humility carries over into the New Testament where the act of being humbled is once again presented as a pathway to salvation. Indeed for some, humility is viewed as a cornerstone of Christian spirituality,¹ a virtue that both does and should play an essential role in our moral and spiritual lives.

For present purposes, we’ll call this religious conception of humility the “self-abasement view”—a view whereby we should actively and openly acknowledge our lowliness and insignificance in relation to God’s greatness. This way of understanding humility was taken to its extreme during the Middle Ages—a historical twist that set the stage for hundreds of years of debate. Consider the following representative passages:



- “When a man reflects on these things.... He will be filled with fear and trembling, as he becomes conscious of his own lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance.... He will then realize he is a vessel full of shame, dishonor, and reproach, empty and deficient.” (Maimonides, twelfth century/1972, p. 48)
- “If this device [humbling oneself before God] is properly understood in its subtlety, it is nothing else but a true knowledge and experience of yourself as you are, a wretch, filth, far worse than nothing. This knowledge and experience is humility.” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, fourteenth century/1981, p. 181)

According to this, humility not only requires us to have a low-minded attitude toward our accomplishments and self-worth, but also to engage in active self-abasement (and perhaps even self-loathing).

This extreme version of religious humility drew the critical glance of philosophers, ranging from Spinoza and Hume to Nietzsche and Sidgwick. If humility requires “self-abasement to the lowest place” (*ST*, II-II, Q. 161, Art. 1, ad. 2) as St. Thomas Aquinas and others have suggested, then it is hard to see how it could be a virtue—especially when a certain degree of dignity, self-worth, and self-esteem contribute to our health and happiness. Given the historical association between humility and humiliation, self-degradation, shame, and the like—and the view of the humble person as someone “who accepts his lowly position as *due him*” (Taylor, 1985, p. 17, emphasis added)—it is no wonder that humility fell out of fashion in the wake of the Enlightenment.

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

In order to sidestep the self-abasement view, some adopted a more positive conception of humility whereby the genuinely humble person could have a perfectly accurate appreciation for his or her own value, skills, and abilities—the person just couldn’t give it much thought or grant it much importance. According to this view, one need not be self-deprecating to be humble—one need only to “keep one’s accomplishments, traits, abilities ... in perspective, even if stimulated to exaggerate them” (Richards, 1988, p. 256; see also Snow, 1995). In other words, humility might not require us to hold ourselves in low regard, but rather



just to not be *enamored with* ourselves. Like previous views, this account involved a “reduction” of the self—but here it was a “decentering” rather than a “decreasing.” We cease to experience ourselves as the center of the universe and recognize that there is more out there to think about, and to *care* about, than ourselves.

The chief benefit of this more positive conception of humility should be clear—because being humble merely requires the absence of self-importance and the ability to keep one’s ego in check, it involves neither self-deception nor self-abasement. Plus, this view is compatible with both self-esteem and self-understanding—two important traits that cannot be easily accommodated by other accounts of humility. This makes it easier to consider humility a virtue.

One of the key issues when it comes to the ongoing debate about humility is where we should begin—that is, which variety of humility should we embrace and which should we eschew? From what we’ve said in the preceding pages, it’s probably clear which variety we prefer—accounts of humility that allow us to treat it as a virtue seem preferable to those that force us to treat it as a vice.² But before we present our own positive account of the core of humility (in the “Our Own Positive Account of Humility” section) and discuss the evidence we believe supports it (in the “Understanding Humility” section), we should briefly explore the ways psychologists have defined and operationalized humility.

The Psychology of Humility

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

The first is that before researchers can study humility, they must first consistently define it. Given humility’s tangled history, this is no simple task. Some researchers (e.g., Klein, 1992; Knight and Nadel, 1986; Langston and Cantor, 1989; Weiss and Knight, 1980) adopted the traditional “self-abasement” view—borrowing from dictionary definitions of humility, such as “the quality of being humble or of having a lowly opinion of oneself; meekness, lowliness, humbleness: the opposite of pride or haughtiness” (*Oxford English Dictionary*; McArthur, 1998) or “lowly in kind, state, condition, etc.; of little worth, unimportant ... having a sense of insignificance,



unworthiness, dependence, or sinfulness" (*Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary*, 1963).

Others have adopted more positive conceptions of humility. Tangney (2000) defines humility as having (1) an accurate assessment of one's talents and achievements; (2) the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations; (3) an openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice; and (4) a general appreciation of the value of other people and things. Others define it along similar lines—such as having a moderate or accurate view of oneself (Baumeister and Exline, 2002; Emmons, 1999; Rowatt et al., 2002; Sandage, Wiens, and Dahl, 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 and Seligman, 2004), as well as an open-minded willingness to admit mistakes and seek new information and a general desire to learn (Hwang, 1982; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Templeton, 1997).

Yet others have define humility in terms of interpersonal qualities—such as empathy, gentleness, respect, and appreciation for the equality, autonomy, and value of others (Halling, Kunz, and Rowe, 1994; Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, and Bach, 1990; Sandage, 1999; Tangney, 2002, 2009), gratitude (Emmons, 2007), a willingness to share credit for accomplishments and acknowledge mistakes (Exline and Geyer, 2004; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004), an openness to new or divergent ideas (Gantt, 1967; Harrell and Bond, 2006; Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski, 2005; Neuringer, 1991; Tangney, 2000, 2009; Templeton, 1995), and a willingness to surrender oneself to God or some other transcendent power (Emmons and Kneezel, 2005; Murray, 2001; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, and Hill, 2007). Relatedly, Rowden (2009) defines humility as a shift from the narrow preoccupation with self *or* other into the broader consideration of self *and* other.

Even with these more positive empirical accounts of humility, some important worries linger. For one, these accounts conflate humility with other constructs. For example, the most prominent views of humility—as a Values in Action Inventory (VIA) character strength (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) or as a factor in the HEXACO account of personality (Lee and Ashton, 2004)—mix features of humility with other constructs, such as modesty (both views), honesty, sincerity, greed avoidance, and fairness (HEXACO only). Yet, recent data—including our own—suggest

that humility is distinct from these constructs (Davis et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2015).

In addition, most of the empirical accounts of humility suffer from the same basic flaw: They do not specify which of the attributes or qualities listed constitute the *core* of humility and which are simply related to humility—for example, 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. However, that does not mean that those attributes and qualities are humility. Indeed, our worry is that while these approaches capture some of the psychological preconditions of humility—as well as some of the interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of being humble—they nevertheless fail to illuminate the core of humility itself (more on this in the section “Our Own Positive Account of Humility”).

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

In response to this, researchers have adopted approaches to studying dispositional humility that don’t involve self-report—relying on informant ratings of humility (Lee et al., 2010; Rowatt et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2010), implicit association tests for humility (Powers et al., 2007; Rowatt et al., 2006), or participants’ comparisons of self to others (Rowatt et al., 2002). At the same time, however, self-report measures have several advantages, which some have argued outweigh the risks (for a review, see Paulhus and Vazire, 2007). And a few self-report measures of humility have been developed—the two most prominent being the Modesty–Humility subscale of the VIA scale (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and the Honesty–Humility subscale of HEXACO (Lee and Ashton, 2004).³

While it is important for researchers to have as many tools as possible for measuring humility, we were ultimately dissatisfied with all of the extant measures (albeit for different reasons—discussed in Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2016). Therefore, in the “Understanding Humility” section, we will present the results from our own attempts to develop an indirect self-report measure of humility.

Our Own Positive Account of Humility

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

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

By “ethically aligned,” we mean that humility is the understanding and experiencing of oneself as only one among a host of other morally relevant beings, whose interests are as legitimate, and as worthy of attention and concern, as one’s own (a state of “extended compassion”). In this way, humility is a corrective to our natural tendency to strongly prioritize or privilege ourselves (our needs, interests, benefits, etc.)—that is, to seek “premium treatment” for ourselves, even at significant cost to others. Operationalized, this is the dimension of high other-focus.

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

Humility corrects for this by bringing this into an epistemically and ethically justifiable range. Of course, what constitutes “an epistemically and ethically justifiable” range is a question that we cannot answer here—but at its pinnacle, we take it to be something like what Johnston (2009) was pointing to when he wrote the following:

The independent facts of personal identity do not justify our patterns of self-concern; rather, the facts of personal identity are partly determined by those patterns of

self-concern. Given that, the central commandment of Christianity—to love one's neighbor, indeed even one's enemies, as oneself—is nothing less than an *identity-reconstituting* command. The command is Janus-faced: *it requires that one love the arbitrary other as oneself, but it also requires that one love oneself objectively; that is, as just the arbitrary other whose life one is nonetheless called upon to lead ...* to the extent that one carries out this commandment, one becomes present wherever and whenever human beings are present; one lives on in the onward rush of humankind and acquires a new face every time a baby is born. For one stands to all others in the identity-constituting relation that one formerly stood in just to oneself. (p. 185, emphasis added)

Our own view of humility is similarly Janus-faced. On the one side is *low self-focus*—the shift, not in self-esteem, or even necessarily self-concern, but in *self-prioritization*—that follows from this proper psychological positioning. On the other side is *high other-focus*—the corresponding increase in one's orientation *outward* toward other morally relevant beings, accompanied by an increased prioritization of their needs, interests, and benefits and increased concern for their well-being, as well as an increased appreciation for their value, generally speaking.⁴

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

Importantly, this “decentering” of one's focus away from self does more than just shift one's focus to the needs and interests of others—that is, low self-focus is *more than* (and does not necessarily require) high other-focus. After all, someone could have low self-focus without being focused on the interests of others. The converse is true as well—someone could be focused on others while at the same time thinking more of himself or herself than that person should. For present purposes, the kind of low self-focus we have in mind involves the reorientation of one's relationship to the outside world, highlighting the importance of keeping things in proper perspective and being mindful of one's place in the larger scheme of things. Accordingly, behavioral manifestations of low self-focus should include (among other things) a lack of desire to self-aggrandize or self-promote and an openness to new and challenging information,

a simplicity in self-presentation and/or lifestyle (i.e., modesty, open-mindedness, etc.).

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

On this view, by being invested in the lives of others—rather than merely completely absorbed with satisfying our own selfish interests—we become grounded and embedded in the world. Indeed, looked at properly, humility doesn’t reduce the force or scope of one’s own needs and interests—rather, it greatly expands them. Others’ well-being becomes entangled with our own.⁵

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

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

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

Understanding Humility

Project 1: Exploring Our Folk Concept of Humility

One way to examine whether our account of humility has merit is to investigate how well it matches up with how people normally think and talk about humility. To examine this, we worked with three different age groups—specifically middle school, high school, and adult participants (Nadelhoffer, Wright, Echols, Perini, and Venezia, 2016).⁶

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

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

In the lack of humility condition, 95% referred to the *lack of* low self-focus and 52% referred to the *lack of* high other-focus. These were again the most common attributes assigned to the nonhumble exemplar, the next most common (41%) being negative psychological attributes, such as being *not* calm or peaceful, as well as being greedy, self-centered, arrogant, unfriendly, uptight, ungrateful, and inappreciative, and (11%) other vices, such as being rigid, dogmatic, dominating, dishonest, and untrustworthy.⁷

When we asked 251 middle school (6th–8th grades) and high school (9th–12th grades) students to think about the virtue of humility and describe what someone who has a lot (i.e., someone who is very humble) is like, their responses looked similar—though we found interesting developmental trends for both dimensions. Specifically, 22% of 5th–6th graders, 54% of 7th–8th graders, 76% of 9th–10th graders, and 71% of 11th–12th graders referred to low self-focus; 15% of 5th–6th graders, 46% of 7th–8th graders, 63% of 9th–10th graders, and 67% of 11th–12th graders referred to high other-focus (see figure 6.1).

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

Importantly, they also referred to more positive attributes: 22% of 5th–6th graders, 35% of 7th–8th graders, and 17% of both 9th–10th and 11th–12th graders referred to positive psychological attributes, describing humble people as friendly, easygoing, simple, down-to-earth, calm, peaceful, polite, courteous, grateful, appreciative, happy, and content. They also—somewhat less frequently—referred to positive moral virtues,

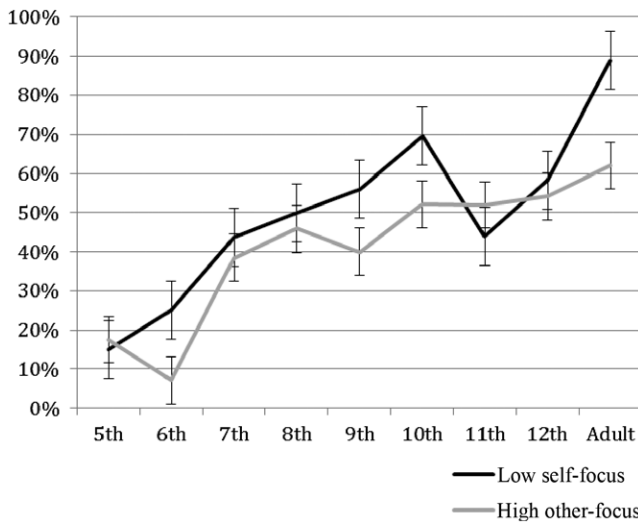


Figure 6.1
 Low self-focus and high other-focus across grade-level/age groups.



describing them as admirable, dignified, honest, trustworthy, wise, mature, open-minded, hardworking, reliable, and responsible.

Summary of Findings Together, these data suggest a developing appreciation for the bidimensionality of humility, for the centrality of both low self-focus and high other-focus in the humble person—as well as their absence in the non-humble person. And while it could be argued that some of the other attributes and virtues assigned to the humble person (e.g., peaceful, calm, down-to-earth, polite, open-minded, etc.) flow naturally from low self-focus and high other-focus, others might be better explained as a “halo effect” (Thorndike, 1920), where a person high in one attribute is viewed as more likely to be high in a range of them.⁸

While at this point only suggestive, we were also intrigued by the fact that the children referenced negative attributes for the humble person, increasingly so the younger they were. In Nadelhoffer et al. (2016), 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 we still think this is a reasonable explanation of the data, especially since in our high schoolers—at the age where Piaget and Cooks’s (1952) formal operations begin to develop, which facilitates abstract perspective taking, empathy, and a shift into epistemic relativism (Chandler, Boyes, and Ball, 1990; Kuhn, Cheney, and Weinstock, 2000)—the reference to negative attributes is greatly reduced, almost disappearing altogether in our adult data.⁹

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

Project 2: Measuring Humility

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



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

In addition, as mentioned in the section “Our Own Positive Account of Humility,” they both mixed humility with other related, though arguably distinct, constructs. As a consequence, neither has more than a few items actually targeting *humility*—and therefore wouldn’t provide the sort of fine-grained data we were after. Thus, we developed and validated our own scale (Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2016 that contained twenty-five items with five different subscales (five items each; see the appendix). Self-focus was measured indirectly through three subscales—religious humility and secular (cosmic and environmental) humility—along with other-focus and a fifth subscale best conceptualized as a measure of people’s attitudes about humility (value of humility).

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

Religious humility is moderately correlated— r s between 0.13 and 0.26, $ps < 0.004$ —with secular (cosmic and environmental) humility, value of humility, and other-focus. Both aspects of secular humility are strongly correlated with each other— $r = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$ —as well as value of humility, and other-focus— r s between 0.41 and 0.53, $ps < 0.001$.

As we shall see when we turn to the significance of humility—in terms of its capacity to predict other positive psychological and moral attributes—it is important to examine the role of each of these subscales separately. Though a composite “humility” score can be computed by averaging all twenty-five items together, interpreting its meaning is tricky. Consider—would a person who scored high on all three subscales of low self-focus count as having “more humility” than an atheist who scored high only on

the secular measures? That seems problematic. Thus, perhaps the best interpretation of a composite score would be as representing greater or lesser *opportunities for*, or *expressions of*, humility—rather than higher or lower humility itself.

Project 3: Exploring How Humble People Write

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

To examine this, we asked 250 U.S. adult participants to respond in an essay format to questions designed to capture both low self-focus and high other-focus. Specifically, they were asked to reflect on their relationship with (or to) each of the following, presented in a randomized order: (1) the surrounding universe or cosmos, (2) God or a higher power, (3) the earth and the environment, and (4) 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, and Nadelhoffer, 2015).

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

This revealed that, relative to the non-humble passages, the humble passages included more *inclusive* language (e.g., “we,” “us,” “our,” as well as “all,” “together,” “everything”) whereas the non-humble passages included more *exclusive* language (e.g., “they,” “them,” “people,” “my own,” “some,” etc.). The humble passages also used “and” much more frequently; the non-humble passages more frequently used “or.” Generally speaking, the humble passages used language designed to break down boundaries and hierarchies, maintain equality, and emphasize connection whereas the non-humble passages used language intended to express skepticism, impose judgment, assert superiority, and emphasize disconnection.

These preliminary analyses suggest that people's humility “leaks through” when they are reflecting on their relationships to the world around them and to others. Though there is much yet to be done before we

can generalize these patterns, we are hopeful that eventually we'll have a reliable way to detect the presence (or absence) of humility.

Project 4: Exploring the Value of Humility

Despite differences of opinion concerning how humility should be measured—if it can be measured at all—there is widespread agreement in the empirical literature that cultivating humility is a good thing. For example, studies using the “Honesty–Humility” construct (measured by the HEXACO; Ashton and Lee, 2008) found that it correlated with lower rates of infidelity. People low in honesty–humility were more likely to commit moral transgressions—and less likely to admit it (Hilbig, Moshagen, and Zettler, 2015). People high in honesty–humility were more cooperative, and more responsive to incentives for cooperation (Ashton and Lee, 2008; Zettler, Hilbig, and Heydasch, 2013)—in economic trade games, they made more fair allocations and acted more cooperatively, refraining from exploiting their trade partner even when they had the chance to do so (Hilbig and Zettler, 2009). Individual differences in honesty–humility were negatively related to manipulativeness, dishonesty, infidelity, vengefulness, social dominance, and other antisocial behaviors while being positively related to integrity and a range of other morally relevant capacities (for an overview, see Ashton et al., 2004).

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

There are also a number of documented social benefits of humility for humble people themselves. For example, humble people avoid the pitfalls of boasting and grandiose attitudes, both of which generate negative impressions in other people (Colvin, Block, and Funder, 1995; Godfrey, Jones, and Lord, 1986; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, and Duncan, 1997). Since humility leads to higher levels of cooperation, sharing, and a lack of



self-preoccupation, it is also likely to foster closer ties with one's friends, family, and romantic partners (Friesen, 2001). Indeed, romantic partners who had recently been hurt in their relationships, but who perceived their partners as humble, were more likely to forgive them for the hurt (Davis et al., 2011, 2012). And Davis et al. (2013) found humility to be positively related to greater group status and acceptance, helping to form and repair relationships with strong social bonds.

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

With respect to the first prediction, we found (Wright, et al., 2015; Wright, Nadelhoffer, and Ross, 2015) that people's humility subscales were all positively correlated¹⁰ with their sense of civic responsibility and desire to meaningfully contribute to their communities (Furco et al., 1998), as well as concern for the welfare of people in their lives and appreciation for the importance of community values and traditions (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987), and their commitment to living an honest, principled life (Schlenker, 2008).

In addition, all but religious humility were positively correlated with the strength of their humanitarian–egalitarian ideals (Katz and Hass, 1988), their commitment to the understanding, appreciation, and tolerance of their fellow humans (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987), the importance of moral virtues and values to their personal identity (Aquino and Reed, 2002), the strength of their “individualizing” (harm/care and fairness) moral intuitions (Graham and Haidt, 2009,¹¹ and their desire to be economically charitable toward others—as well as negatively related to their desire for undeserved social status (Wright and Reinhold, 2016).

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





(both people and nature) than to one's feeling of insignificance before the splendor of the universe or God.

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

Environmental humility, value of humility—and, less so, cosmic humility—were positively correlated with people's agentic values of self-direction and achievement, though not power, stimulation, or hedonism (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987), as well as their sense of autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). While it might seem counterintuitive for humility to be correlated with an increased sense of agency and self-direction, we think this is a reflection of something like the strong integration of agentic and community-oriented values found in moral exemplars (Frimer, Walker, Dunlop, Lee, and Riches, 2011)—where one's sense of self-direction and accomplishment become intertwined with one's desire to meaningfully contribute to the welfare and well-being of others.¹² They were also positively correlated with increased mindfulness (Neff, 2003) and secure adult attachment—as well as negatively correlated with anxious attachment (Collins and Read, 1990) and scores on the “dark triad” (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy; Jonason and Webster, 2010).

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

Copredictors One thing correlations cannot tell us is the degree to which self-focus and other-focus are *copredictors* of these morally relevant capacities and indicators of psychological well-being—each explaining their *own portion* of the variance in people's responses, and thereby collectively explaining more variance than either would by itself. To examine this, we





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entered religious humility, secular humility (cosmic and environmental combined), and other-focus into regression equations with the variables discussed above.

What we found was that secular humility (i.e., self-focus) and other-focus copredict people's scores on a wide range of attributes:¹³ their commitment to humanitarian–egalitarian ideals, the degree to which they value universal principles and the well-being of others, the strength of their “individualizing” moral intuitions, their sense of moral integrity and moral identity—that is, the centrality of moral values and principles to their sense of self and the goals they set for their lives.

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

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

High versus Low Humilities One question that remained unanswered is whether there are people who are low in one dimension of humility while being high in another—and whether these differences predict differences in the other attributes that matter. To answer this, we split people into “low/high” categories (0 = low, 1 = high) using a mean split for religious humility, secular humility, and other-focus. These were then added together, so that people low in all three would receive a 0 and people high in all three would receive a 3—with people low in some and high in others receiving numbers in between. Out of 472 adult participants, 22% were consistently (all three) high in humility, and 16% were consistently low, while 62% were inconsistent. Of those, 45% were the result of a split between religious and secular humility (i.e., self-focus)—people being high in one, but low in the other—while only 17% resulted from a split between self-focus and other-focus, suggesting that the two track one another most of the time.

People's humility ranking (0–3) predicted their score on several morally relevant attributes and indicators of psychological well-being—the higher





their ranking, the higher (or the lower) their score. For example, humility ranking predicted people's commitment to humanitarian–egalitarian ideals, sense of civic responsibility and commitment to conservation of community values and tradition, the value of universal principles and the well-being of others, the strength of “individualizing” and “binding” moral intuitions, their sense of moral integrity and identity, and charitability. It also positively predicted their cognitive, social, and emotional empathy and negatively predicted their desire for undeserved social status and economic gain. And it positively predicted their level of faith maturity, their intrinsic religiosity, and their ability to positively “frame” their lives, imbuing them with meaning (see table 6.1).

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

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

Humility as a Foundational Virtue?

Elsewhere we maintain (Wright and Nadelhoffer, in press) that humility should be considered a “foundational” virtue, necessary—though not sufficient—for the full development of other virtues, and virtuous character more generally. Our argument for this is, roughly speaking, as follows: Being fully virtuous requires doing things in the right way at the right time for the right reasons—all of which require, among other things, the *right sort of psychological positioning of oneself* relative to all other morally significant beings.¹⁴ Humility, as we've defined it, provides this psychological positioning—and it is the only thing that does.¹⁵ Therefore, humility is necessary for being fully virtuous.



Table 6.1
Differences in moral attributes, psychological well-being, and religiosity by humility ranking

Humility Ranking	Hum-Egal	Civic-Res	Self-rans	Comm-Tradition	MFQ-Ind	MFQ-Bind	Moral-ID	Pos-Frame	Pos-Life-Meaning	Neg-Life-Meaning
3 low	1.32	-0.36	2.99	2.57	3.46	2.18	0.82	0.37	0.18	-0.07
1 high, 2 low	1.22	0.22	3.31	2.78	3.50	2.19	1.02	0.41	0.25	-0.12
2 high, 1 low	1.76	0.47	3.90	3.26	3.83	2.63	1.16	0.62	0.40	-0.27
3 high	2.16	1.36	4.37	3.89	4.09	3.15	1.43	0.81	0.67	-0.55
Humility Ranking	Greed-Soc-Status	Prosociality	Greed-Econ	Emp-Cog	Emp-Soc	Emp-Emot	Moral-Integ	Faith-Mat-Devine	Faith-Mat-Service	Relig-Int
3 low	-1.26	1.01	-0.87	0.84	0.64	0.41	0.64	1.32	1.05	1.29
1 high, 2 low	-1.13	1.07	-0.65	0.86	0.53	0.38	0.76	2.02	1.92	1.23
2 high, 1 low	-1.47	1.83	-1.31	1.49	1.22	0.78	1.17	3.24	3.56	2.21
3 high	-1.82	2.05	-1.48	1.30	1.20	1.12	1.63	3.67	3.67	3.74

Table 6.1 (continued)

	Humility Ranking			
	3 low	1 high, 2 low	2 high, 1 low	3 high
Humanitarian—Egalitarian	1.32	1.22	1.76	2.16
Civic Responsibility	-0.36	0.22	0.47	1.36
Agency—Self Transcendence	2.99	3.31	3.9	4.37
Community—Tradition	2.57	2.78	3.26	3.89
MFQ—Harm/Fairness	3.46	3.5	3.83	4.09
MFQ—Group/Authority/Purity	2.18	2.19	2.63	3.15
Moral Identity	0.82	1.02	1.16	1.43
Life Regard—Positive Frame	0.37	0.41	0.62	0.81
Positive Life Meaning	0.18	0.25	0.4	0.67
Negative Life Meaning	-0.07	-0.12	-0.27	-0.55
Greed—Social Status	-1.26	-1.13	-1.47	-1.82
Prosociality	1.01	1.07	1.83	2.05
Greed—Economic	-0.87	-0.65	-1.31	-1.48
Empathy—Cognitive	0.84	0.86	1.49	1.3
Empathy—Social	0.64	0.53	1.22	1.2
Empathy—Emotional	0.41	0.38	0.78	1.12
Moral Integrity	0.64	0.76	1.17	1.63
Faith Maturity—Devine	1.32	2.02	3.24	3.67
Faith Maturity—Service	1.05	1.92	3.56	3.67
Religiosity Intrinsic	1.29	1.23	2.21	3.74

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

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

Or consider honesty. As a general rule, honesty only becomes difficult when it puts our needs and interests at risk (or otherwise interferes with them)—and we have a hard time properly adjudicating between our own needs/interests and those of the individual(s) with whom we are failing to be truthful. This makes the psychological positioning provided by humility critical for eliminating (or at least decreasing) the temptation to privilege our needs/interests over those of others. If we view our needs/interests as interconnected with theirs, then by harming them we harm ourselves.

It is worth noting that people’s humility ranking predicted other morally relevant attributes more frequently than indicators of psychological well-being, where it appears that simply having humility at any level is sufficient. This provides at least preliminary support for the above view. Of course, showing that as people’s expression of humility increased, so did other morally relevant attributes does not, by itself, allow us to conclude that humility is necessary for virtue. There are other potential explanations for this finding and for the relationship between humility and other morally relevant attributes more generally. Clearly more theoretical and empirical work is needed.

Future Directions

If it is the case that humility is a foundational virtue, then there are several things that we ought to expect to find, but the one in which we are the most interested—and, thus, the direction in which we next hope to go—is



the presence of humility in moral exemplars versus moral novices. Specifically, we should expect to find that humility is the *most stable shared attribute* across moral exemplars (who could otherwise differ from one another along a variety of traits) and the *most stable unshared attribute* between moral exemplars and moral novices.

It is also going to be important to study more carefully how the sort of psychological positioning we've argued is created by humility comes about. One of the developmental paths suggested by our research is the "being humbled" path—that is, having the sorts of experiences that shame us for our arrogance, forcing us out of our egocentric center so that we catch a glimpse of the bigger picture. But how and when such experiences facilitate the shift into humility requires study. And other developmental paths are likely.

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

Notes

1. Some have even claimed that humility "was a quintessentially Christian discovery" (Konkola 2005, p. 185).
2. For a defense of this view, see Nadelhoffer et al. (2016).
3. We examined three additional self-report measures for humility. The first two were Elliot's (2010) Humility Scale and Quiros's (2008) Healthy Humility Inventory. Both were developed for doctoral dissertations, and neither (to our knowledge) has been published. The third self-report measure for humility we considered is the Dispositional Humility Scale found in Landrum (2011). To our knowledge, this scale has not yet been validated. Indeed, Landrum acknowledges in the title of the paper that the scale represents a "first approximation."
4. Some may worry about including high other-focus as a part of humility rather than treating it as something related but distinct. In addition to what we've already said, we think there are clear historical reasons for this (consider a paradigmatic example of humility: Jesus washing his disciples' feet in John 13:1–17—after which, he instructed them to do likewise for others), and we will provide empirical evidence in the "Understanding Humility" section to further support this view.
5. Moral exemplars say things like this (Colby and Damon, 1994). And, though they don't talk about it this way, this is the central insight of Frimer, Walker, Dunlop,





Lee, and Riches's (2011) "enlightened self-interest"—the weaving together of one's agentic and community values. Moral exemplars flourish personally by facilitating/contributing to the flourishing of others—they experience their own needs/interests as *bound up with* and *woven into* the needs/interests of others.

6. The high school data were collected after, and therefore not reported in, Nadelhoffer et al. (2015).

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

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

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

10. All reported correlations were significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

11. Only religious humility scores were correlated with the "binding" (authority, group membership, purity) intuitions.

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





13. Once again, all analyses reported had $ps < 0.01$.
14. This encompasses both moral *agents* and moral *patients*.
15. One might object that a person doesn't have to possess humility to achieve the right sort of psychological positioning—one can get there by just using the “impersonal force” of reason. Here, we are reminded of something Kant (1785) said in the *Groundwork*, which is that reason allows us “...to behold virtue in her proper shape,” which “...is nothing other than to show morality stripped of all admixture with the sensuous and of all the spurious adornments of reward or self-love” (pp. 61–62n). Our response would be (roughly) that if we take the x-phi research coming out on ethicists (e.g., Switzgebel and Rust, 2013) seriously, it clearly shows that one's ability to reason one's way to these conclusions is not the same thing as *experiencing* them—as *occupying the world* from the position they require. To know what virtue requires is not the same thing as being virtuous or living virtuously.

Appendix

Final Scale Statements

Religious Humility (Low Self-Focus: Existential Awareness)

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

Cosmic Humility (Low Self-Focus: Existential Awareness)

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

Environmental Humility (Low Self-Focus: Existential Awareness)

11. Humans have to learn to share the Earth with other species.
12. We should always try to be in harmony with Mother Nature.



13. I often feel in touch with Mother Nature.
14. It's important from time to time to commune with nature.
15. Caring for humanity requires us to care about the environment.

Other Focus (High Other-Focus: Extended Compassion)

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

Valuing Humility (Indirect Measure of Humility)

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

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6.1 Assessing Humility Is a Humbling Experience: Commentary on Nadelhoffer and Wright

Shannon W. Schrader and June P. Tangney

We appreciate Nadelhoffer and Wright's incisive analysis of the challenges in measuring humility and their multimethod approach to understanding the nature of humility and its downstream implications. We are hopeful that the strides taken by Nadelhoffer and Wright, and other researchers in the field, will provide a deeper understanding of the long-neglected virtue of humility.

Definition of Humility

Although humility is often mistakenly equated with a sense of unworthiness and low self-regard, true humility is a desirable character trait (Exline and Geyer, 2004). In our view, the key elements of humility include (1) an accurate assessment of one's abilities and achievements, (2) a willingness to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations, (3) an openness to new ideas, contradictory evidence, and advice, (4) an ability to keep one's place in the world in perspective (e.g., seeing oneself as just one person in the larger scheme of things), (5) a relatively low self-focus (i.e., a "forgetting of the self"), and (6) appreciation of the value of others (Tangney, 2000). It seems likely that there are individual differences in the degree to which people high in humility exhibit these various components of humility. Moreover, these components may manifest in different ways across individuals. However, each of these elements is emphasized in contemporary theological, philosophical, and psychological portrayals of humility as a rich, multifaceted construct (Tangney, 2000).

In contrast, Nadelhoffer and Wright offer a novel conceptualization of humility that entails a psychological positioning of oneself along two dimensions: low on a dimension of *self-focus* and high on a dimension of *other-focus*. These two overarching aspects of humility incorporate a number of key elements of our definition of humility including a "forgetting of

the self.” But we also believe that humility entails several important additional components, such as an accurate assessment of the self and the ability to acknowledge one’s own mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often vis-à-vis a “higher power”). By defining humility along two dimensions—*self-focus* (low) and *other-focus* (high)—some important nuances may be lost. Moreover, it is not clear whether self-focus and other-focus are two distinct dimensions or opposite ends of a single dimension: a self-focus versus other-focus dimension.

Boundaries of the Construct of Humility

A major issue identified by Nadelhoffer and Wright concerns the boundaries of the construct of humility. What elements comprise humility proper and what constructs are related to, but conceptually distinct from, humility as potential precursors, correlates, and/or outcomes of humility?

Nadelhoffer and Wright view the bidimensionality of humility as an epistemic and ethical alignment. The epistemic component—low *self-focus*—seems to us central to the construct of humility. From this perspective, humility is a quintessential “hypo-egoic” virtue (Leary and Terry, 2012). In contrast, Nadelhoffer and Wright’s definition of ethical alignment or high *other-focus* appears to us to be an effect or downstream consequence rather than a core element of humility. More generally, we suggest that interpersonal qualities such as empathy, gentleness, and gratitude are potentially important outcomes of humility, not components of humility itself. To the extent that measures of humility conflate core features and theoretical outcomes, it will not be possible to empirically test (rather than assume) such links.

For instance, we believe that increased prioritization of others’ needs is an outcome, not necessarily a key component, of humility proper. Humility, owing to the appreciation for the value of others, may lead to a prioritization of others’ needs. Similarly, humility may facilitate empathy for others, but we question the wisdom of including empathy under the umbrella of humility, per se. There exists a rich and extensive theoretical and empirical literature on empathy (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987; Eisenberg, 2014; Batson, 2009) as a construct in its own right, with little reference to humility. Much work has been conducted to refine our conceptualization of empathy and to distinguish it from other related constructs. For example, researchers have found it useful to distinguish between empathy and sympathy (Eisenberg and Fabes, 1990). More recently, Greenberg and Turksma (2015) identified compassion as another empathy-related but

distinct construct. As science progresses, finer distinctions are made and tested. Including empathy under the conceptual umbrella of humility seems to us a step backward, precluding the ability to actually test whether humility results in greater empathy.

Caution in Interpreting Results from Conceptually Inconsistent Measures

Caution is needed in interpreting results of research on “humility” that have drawn on outdated measures that are inconsistent with current conceptualizations of the construct. For example, early studies operationalized humility as low self-esteem or as an underestimate of one’s abilities, accomplishments, or worth (e.g., Klein, 1992; Knight and Nadel, 1986; Langston and Cantor, 1988). Results of these studies tell us little about humility as currently conceptualized as a character strength.

Much of the existing empirical literature rests on studies employing the HEXACO Personality Inventory (HEXACO) Honesty–Humility subscale (Lee and Ashton, 2004) or the Values in Action Inventory (VIA) Modesty–Humility subscale (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). We agree with Nadelhoffer and Wright that the HEXACO and VIA do not provide conceptually sound humility scales. For example, the HEXACO assesses six major personality dimensions—the sixth factor being Honesty–Humility. The HEXACO Honesty–Humility factor consists of four facets: sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty. As modesty is only one facet of the Honesty–Humility subscale and modesty is not synonymous with humility, it is difficult to argue that the HEXACO actually measures humility. Similarly, the VIA Modesty–Humility subscale confounds modesty with humility. Humility is related to, but distinct from, the construct of modesty. Modesty is both too narrow, missing fundamental components of humility (i.e., a forgetting of the self) and too broad, relating also to bodily exposure and other dimensions of propriety, where the construct of humility is less relevant.

With these thoughts in mind, we join Nadelhoffer and Wright in urging caution in using the HEXACO and VIA to assess humility. Further, we warn against interpreting results from studies utilizing these measures.

What Is Known about the Causes, Correlates, and Consequences of Humility?

At present, it is difficult to summarize what is known about the causes, correlates, and consequences of humility because the field has yet to come to an agreement on which measures constitute valid measures of humility.

Citing mostly studies employing the HEXACO, Nadelhoffer and Wright conclude that “there is widespread agreement in the empirical literature that cultivating humility is a good thing.” We agree that cultivating humility is apt to result in positive intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes, but to our mind, the empirical jury is still out. Studies are necessary that assess humility in a fashion consistent with current definitions, and that are not confounded with items assessing potential outcomes of interest.

Nadelhoffer and Wright’s Humility Scale

Wright, Nadelhoffer, and colleagues offer a promising alternative measure to the HEXACO and VIA with their own humility scale (Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2016). The authors’ humility scale is consistent with their conceptualization of humility as consisting of low self-focus (composed of religious humility, cosmic humility, and environmental humility subscales) in conjunction with high other-focus. However, it is not clear how these particular domains (e.g., religious, cosmic, and environmental) of humility were selected. One could imagine many other possible humility subscales including humility in regard to physical attractiveness, intelligence, or wealth.

Nadelhoffer and Wright’s newly developed self-report measure is apt to have some of the same drawbacks as other self-report measures of humility. First, self-report methods for assessing humility may be confounded with social desirability or self-enhancement. While Nadelhoffer and Wright state their self-report measures humility indirectly, we worry that some items are still prone to social desirability bias (e.g., “I often feel humble when I think of a Higher Power” and “I often place the interests of others over my own interests”). Second, self-report measures of humility raise questions about the degree to which people have insight into their own level of humility. Do humble people truly recognize they are humble? Do hubristic people recognize that they lack humility? The authors’ Valuing Humility subscale, presented as an indirect measure of humility, is an interesting approach—one that might require less insight—but evidence is needed to demonstrate the validity of such a measure.

We appreciate Nadelhoffer and Wright’s attempt to capture different domains of humility. Thus far, most research has focused on general humility—that is, humility regardless of domain. Key domains identified by recent humility research include intellectual humility (e.g., Davis et al., 2016), cultural humility (e.g., Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, and Utsey, 2013), and relational humility (e.g., Davis et al., 2011). This is by no means

an exhaustive list. Researchers in other contexts may emphasize and value different domains of humility. For example, among college students, humility in such domains as social rank, athletic ability, and physical attractiveness may be useful and valued. Research has not yet examined the degree to which different domains of humility are correlated, and whether there is a hierarchical structure such that general humility is a higher order construct reflecting aggregate levels of humility across specific domains. Nadelhoffer and Wright strive to address the multidimensionality of humility by including items spanning several domains (e.g., cosmic humility and environmental humility).

However, we question several of the subscales included in Nadelhoffer and Wright's new measure. For example, the Other Focus subscale seems, to us, to be a measure of compassion, which is not synonymous with humility or high other-focus. In fact, many of the items on the "Other Focus" subscale appear to us to reflect outcomes rather than components of humility (e.g., "I always find myself making sacrifices for others"). Further, the Environmental Humility subscale appears to assess an appreciation of nature and not necessarily low self-focus. Lastly, we believe the items of the Religious Humility subscale would not be applicable to individuals who are not religious. Nadelhoffer and Wright address this issue by stating that one's humility score represents greater or lesser opportunities for humility rather than higher or lower humility. Thus, we wonder whether this is truly a measure of humility or is a measure of potential to experience humility. Despite the aforementioned issues, we look forward to future studies establishing the reliability and validity of Wright, Nadelhoffer, and colleagues' new measure of humility.

Nadelhoffer and Wright approach the study of humility from multiple angles in addition to their self-report measure—via exploration of the folk concept of humility and utilizing linguistic analysis. We commend their attempt to measure this elusive virtue using a creative multimethod approach. Nadelhoffer and Wright's section on exploring the folk concept of humility examines how well the general public's opinion of humility maps onto Nadelhoffer and Wright's account of humility as a combination of low *self-focus* and high *other-focus*. Evidence for the low *self-focus* was most compelling. High *other-focus* was less common, and we question including "openness to new ideas, values, belief systems, and so forth" as necessarily reflecting high *other-focus*. Valuing others, desiring to help others, placing others' needs above one's own, kindness, and compassion seem much more directly relevant to high *other-focus*, as defined by Nadelhoffer and Wright.



Nadelhoffer and Wright's exploration of how humble people write or express themselves via linguistic analysis is a promising indirect approach that avoids some of the limitations inherent in traditional self- or other-report measures of humility. We appreciate this creative approach to measuring a construct as elusive as humility.

Current Perspectives and Future Directions in Humility Research

As one of the classic virtues, humility has a well-deserved place in positive psychology. Under funding from the Templeton Foundation, multiple researchers are developing and testing new measures of humility. For example, Davis et al. (2016) recently developed a measure of intellectual humility. Davis and colleagues (2011) have also developed a sixteen-item Relational Humility Scale, which considers humility within relationships and from an outside perspective. Hook and colleagues (2013) have developed a Cultural Humility Scale, which measures client ratings of therapist's other-orientation and respect for a client's cultural background. Recently, an expressed humility scale was created by Owens and colleagues (2013). In addition, Rowatt and colleagues (2006) developed a humility-specific Implicit Association Test in an effort to create a measure immune from self-presentational biases.

Recent research utilizing these second-generation measures informed by contemporary definitions of humility has documented a link between humility and such positive behavioral outcomes as academic success (Rowatt et al., 2006), academic performance improvement (Owens, Johnson, and Mitchell, 2013), social relationship quality (Peters, Rowatt, and Johnson, 2011), and generosity (Exline and Hill, 2012).

Of course, others may disagree with our particular definition of humility. While work still remains for a clear consensus to emerge, the field has certainly benefited from the diverse views of not only psychology, but also philosophy and theology, facilitated by recent Templeton Foundation initiatives. As a result, the field is nearing a clearer definition of humility that will allow researchers to study hypothesized processes and relationships (e.g., between humility and empathy) including factors that moderate their link. Such advances will only be possible to the extent that these constructs are measured independently. Particular care should be taken to ensure that measures accurately assess humility, unconfounded by items assessing related but distinct constructs like modesty or honesty.

But many intriguing questions still remain. What person and situational factors foster a sense of humility—in the moment and as an enduring trait?





Is humility equally important or adaptive across domains and contexts? Are there circumstances in which humility is a liability? That is, is there a dark side to humility, and if so, for whom and under what conditions? Are there important gender and/or cultural differences in the meaning and implications of humility? How does humility develop and change across the life span, and how can parents, teachers, and therapists foster an adaptive sense of humility? Currently, researchers including Nadelhoffer and Wright are making great strides in developing theoretically driven measures of humility. We hope this research will provide the means to better understand and foster the important virtue of humility.

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6.2 The Nature of Humility: A Critical Perspective on Nadelhoffer and Wright

Nancy E. Snow

“The Twin Dimensions of the Virtue of Humility: Low Self-Focus and High Other-Focus,” is the fascinating and significant product of a collaboration between a philosopher and a psychologist on a relatively neglected topic, the virtue of humility. The paper contributes to the literature on humility in several respects: (1) by outlining a novel conception of humility, (2) by suggesting that humility so construed is necessary for the full development of other virtues, and (3) by offering an empirical glimpse into how humility is viewed by the research participants who were studied. My commentary will challenge (1) and (2) and refer only briefly to (3) in support of my arguments. I should add that, despite my critical comments, I regard their research agenda as important, welcome, and well worth pursuing and hope that the issues I raise will stimulate further work.

A Novel Conception of Humility

The authors offer a new conception of humility, one that includes the twin dimensions of low self-focus and high other-focus. They write (emphasis theirs), “Our view is that humility, at its core, is a *particular psychological positioning of oneself* within the larger context of the universe—one that is both *epistemically and ethically aligned*.” By “epistemically aligned,” they mean that the humble person understands and experiences himself or herself as a finite and fallible being who is part of a larger reality—for example, nature, the cosmos, or a divinely ordered universe. They operationalize this aspect of humility as “low self-focus.” The “ethical alignment” of the humble person is understanding and experiencing himself or herself as “... one among a host of other morally relevant beings, whose interests are as legitimate, and as worthy of attention and concern, as one’s own (a state of “extended compassion”).” Nadelhoffer and Wright regard humility as a “... corrective to our natural tendency to strongly prioritize or privilege

ourselves ... even at significant cost to others." Operationalized, this ethical alignment is humility's dimension of "high other-focus."

The authors seek to bolster the claim that we naturally tend to prioritize ourselves at significant cost to others by drawing on Johnston (2009), as follows:

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

It is not clear whether the last sentence of the quoted statement is an idea from Johnston (2009) or the authors, but it is, as it stands, a non sequitur. Self-prioritization does not follow from the facts that we experience ourselves as the psychological center of a temporally extended life and that we are capable of living that life through rationally guided action. What follows is that we are self-directing. To be self-directing—self-governing or self-guiding—is not the same as being self-prioritizing, and it is not the same as being self-prioritizing in morally problematic ways, which the authors seem to assume is always or at least typically true of self-prioritizing.¹ If the authors claim that we are naturally self-prioritizing in morally problematic ways, they are going against an important philosopher and recent psychological research, and making it harder for themselves to make the case, undertaken later in their essay, that humility is a foundational or gateway virtue that is necessary for the full development of other virtues.

They are going against Aristotle, an important historical figure and influence on contemporary virtue ethics, who contends in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE; Aristotle, 1985) that we have the natural capacities to become either virtuous or vicious. He writes, "Thus the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature, but we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habit" (NE, p. 1103a24–25). For Aristotle, we are not naturally self-prioritizing in morally problematic ways. Though we direct ourselves, that capacity is morally neutral and not slanted toward self-prioritization in ways that are selfish or vicious. Yet the authors seem to assume that our self-prioritization tendencies orient us naturally toward morally problematic behavior, which could include selfishness at the expense of others. If the authors believe

that self-prioritization includes naturally selfish tendencies alone, not counterbalanced by other natural other-regarding tendencies, then they fall foul of the work of the psychologist C. Daniel Batson, who has spent the better part of his career showing that altruistic tendencies are as natural to humans as selfish ones, and the developmental psychologist Darcia Narvaez, who argues that selfish, egocentric tendencies are not the products of nature, but artifacts of certain types of early upbringing (see Batson, 2011; Narvaez, 2014). Of course, others disagree (see, e.g., Hobbes, 1991). But given views such as those of Aristotle, Batson, and Narvaez, the authors seem to be making their task more difficult by assuming that we are naturally self-prioritizing in morally problematic ways that could include selfishness and lead us to act at significant cost to others. If humility is indeed necessary for the full development of other virtues, it seems that to have it or seek it is, in a sense, unnatural, or as the authors put it, a corrective for certain natural tendencies. This would make the acquisition of any virtue difficult indeed.

Let me open another line of critique by noting that the use of the terms “low self-focus” and “high other-focus” is somewhat misleading, especially as regards the ethical alignment the authors claim is required for humility. They write that the ethical alignment of the humble person is such that the person recognizes that the interests of others are *as worthy as his or her own* (my emphasis). This implies the recognition of an equality of the value of interests. It is neither a prioritization (high other-focus), nor a denigration or deferral of the value of one’s interests with respect to those of others (low self-focus). Use of the term “low self-focus” invites a view of humility the authors reject—that involving self-denigration or self-abasement. I prefer instead, “proper” or “appropriate” self-focus, which indicates that humble individuals have an accurate alignment of their own interests vis-à-vis those of others and recognize that neither they nor their interests are, without further argument, to be privileged over, or sacrificed for, others or their interests.

More important, perhaps, are the implications of using the term “high other-focus.” “High other-focus,” as the authors use it, imports a novel element into their conception of humility, namely, extended compassion. I do not believe that extended compassion is a part of humility, though it could well be correlated with humility, as are other positive traits, such as the tendency to be forgiving. I say this despite the authors’ empirical findings, which I think are rather weak indicators of whether extended compassion is indeed a part of humility. In fairness to the authors, they include “extended compassion” in parenthesis, and not as part of their main text. I

would urge them to consider how much of their view they would lose if they did not gloss “high other-focus” as extended compassion.

Humility, it seems to me, is the virtue regulating how one regards oneself relative to a larger landscape. The landscape could be social, but as the authors note, it could also be spiritual, cosmic, or environmental. Humility, as the appropriate or proper view of oneself relative to these other possible landscapes, might not correlate with extended compassion. It is conceptually and psychologically possible for someone to view himself herself as one among many other human beings without thereby having a high focus on them such that he or she feels compassion for them and is interested in their well-being. A humble person could simply go about his or her business without giving much thought to what happens to others. We would say that such a person lacks compassion, but if he or she is not arrogant, vain, conceited, or proud but, rather, has a sense of his or her own talents and abilities without inflating them, we could not, I think, accuse this person of lacking humility. Thus, I disagree with the authors’ statement: “The humble person is someone who is actively interested in promoting or protecting others’ well-being and seeks to make a difference when/where he or she reasonably can.” Similarly, a person might feel insignificant before the grandeur of nature, viewing himself or herself as one small part of a larger whole, without having extended compassion for nature. I take it that “extended compassion” for nature might be manifested in a desire to end global warming, stop fracking, stop strip mining, end animal abuse, or protect endangered species. But one can understand and experience oneself as a small part of a larger whole without having any of these or similar desires.

Later in their essay Nadelhoffer and Wright suggest that “One of the developmental paths suggested by our research is the ‘being humbled’ path—that is, having the sorts of experiences that shame us for our arrogance, forcing us out of our egocentric center so that we catch a glimpse of the bigger picture.” They acknowledge that further research on this path is needed. However, of course, being humbled in this sense—being shamed for arrogance and forced out of our egocentrism, in a word, being taken down a notch or two—does not, at least on first glance, lend itself to a compassionate other-regarding focus. Being humbled in this sense might suggest low self-focus or being forced to recognize one’s equality with others where one had previously thought oneself better or more valuable. However, the authors will need to explain how the mental state of seeing oneself lowered ultimately gives rise to a sense of connectedness and concern for

the others occupying the specific landscape—social, natural, cosmic, or spiritual—within which humbling occurs.

The authors bolster the dimension of extended compassion or high other-focus by offering empirical evidence that the “folk concepts” of humility held by their research participants include this dimension. However, the data they report from this study across several different age groups indicate that low self-focus is more commonly thought of as humility than high other-focus.² For example, of 107 U.S. adults who were asked what a person fully possessing humility would look like, 89% referred to low self-focus, while 62%—27% less—mentioned high other-focus. When asked about what someone lacking humility would look like, 95% mentioned lack of low self-focus and 52%, lack of high other-focus—a difference of 43%.

One further point merits mention. The number of research participants in this study was small (358 total), and all were U.S. adults and, presumably, U.S. schoolchildren. Surveying other research populations could yield interestingly different results on the high other-focus dimension. For example, studying communities of cloistered Roman Catholic monks or nuns might show that their conceptions of humility center mainly on low self-focus, with little or no high other-focus when the “others” on whom one focuses are thought to be people, as opposed to God, and the attitude toward those others is thought to be compassion, as opposed to worship, reverence, or awe. Studying research populations in contemplative Buddhist communities could yield other interesting results, as low self-focus could well correlate with high other-focus. Indeed, the conception of humility the authors embrace could have a strong grounding in Buddhism, with its lack of egocentrism and emphasis on compassion. These observations suggest that the religious conceptions of research participants could influence their “folk conceptions” of humility, and that the nature of the high other-focus dimension of humility, if it is indeed a part of humility and not a separate but correlated construct, could vary with what I’ve called the “landscapes” of humility.

Though it makes sense to talk about high other-focus including a central component of extended compassion for other people, nature, or even the cosmos, it doesn’t make much sense to talk about having compassion for God or a higher spiritual power. Of course, it makes sense to talk about love of God, but love is not the same as compassion. Compassion is feeling sorrow or sympathy for another who is perceived to be in distress, and it presupposes that we are able to identify with the other in his or her plight (see Snow, 1991). Because God is all-powerful and never in distress, he cannot



be an appropriate target of compassion. Moreover, a finite, fallible creature's ability to identify with an omnipotent deity is imperfect and limited, if not presumptuous. High other-focus, then, might need to be revised or "fine-tuned" to better fit the specific landscape of humility. Humility might cause us to feel connected with and love nature and the cosmos, for example, and to experience reverence and awe before God—other-regarding emotions that seem to be a better fit than compassion with the specific landscapes in which humility can occur. What I am suggesting here, in sum, is that in their further research on low self-focus and high other-focus, the authors pay more attention to the background theories or belief sets of participants, such as Roman Catholicism or Buddhism, that can shape understandings of humility, and the "landscape" or context in which humility can arise.

Humility as a Gateway or Foundational Virtue

In the last section of their essay, the authors make the intriguing and appealing claim that "...humility is necessary in order for the *full development* of other virtues to occur" (emphasis theirs). They do not say whether they mean that humility is necessary for the full development of all of the other virtues (whatever they might be) in a person or for the full development of any virtue. I suspect they mean the latter. They also do not tell us what they mean by the "full development" of a virtue, but I assume they mean something like the Aristotelian sense of having an entrenched disposition that provides its possessor with the appropriate motivation for virtuous action as well as with the deliberative capacities by which he or she can do the right thing for the right reason at the right time and in the right way (NE, p. 1107a1–8).

Their argument that humility is the *sine qua non* for the full development of (any other) virtue is brief and to the point:

Being fully virtuous requires doing things in the right way at the right time for the right reasons—all of which require, among other things, the *right sort of psychological positioning of oneself* relative to all other morally significant beings. Humility, as we've defined it, provides this psychological positioning—and it is the only thing that does. Therefore, humility is necessary for being fully virtuous. (Nadelhoffer and Wright, this volume, emphasis theirs)

Suffice it to say the argument as presented fails. It is too strong and too sketchy. The insight the authors have is that the right sort of psychological positioning is required for the full development of virtue. It is not clear





that having humility is the only way of achieving this psychological positioning, nor is it clear that one must have humility before one can attain the right sort of psychological positioning required by other virtues. The authors note (in note 15) the Kantian view that the impersonal force of reason might enable us to attain the psychological positioning necessary for the full development of virtue, but they rightly reject this as too theoretical and abstract. One needs to experience the psychological states needed for virtue, to occupy those states, as the authors put it. By this I take them to mean that the full development of virtue requires the lived experience of virtue, and the lived experience of virtue takes us beyond the impersonal force of reason to include uses of reason in our daily lives in very personal ways, and actual experiences of virtuous motivation as well as of the affective states of virtue. If so, I agree with the authors, but to conclude my commentary, I want to sketch, if only briefly, an alternative to their overly strong position. The alternative relies on two interrelated points. First, developmental aspects of virtue acquisition make it plausible to think that one can acquire the virtues in a piecemeal way. On this picture, one attains the rather exalted psychological positioning attributed to humility over the course of time, and as a result of development in virtue, not as its prerequisite. Second, virtues have a modularity such that the possessor of a specific virtue can have the appropriate psychological positioning required for that virtue without having to have the appropriate psychological positioning required for other virtues, including that attributed by the authors to humility. The modularity of virtue so understood is incompatible with both interpretations of the authors' position mentioned above, namely, that the psychological positioning afforded by humility is necessary for the full development of all of the other virtues, or for the full development of any virtue. To my mind, virtues are modular in such a way that each entails its own distinctive psychological positioning, which can be attained in its own right through the process of acquiring that specific virtue.

How does virtue acquisition occur? If Aristotle is correct, it occurs through habituation when we are young (see NE, Book II). But surely we are taught to be virtuous as situations arise. We are taught generosity by being told to share our toys; compassion, by being shown how to comfort others in distress; courage, by being taught to overcome fear and stand our ground. We are taught and achieve the correct psychological positioning for each virtue on a case-by-case basis, as occasions arise for the practice of any given virtue. So a rather commonsensical view of how we learn to be virtuous does not presuppose the ability to psychologically position ourselves



correctly vis-à-vis the entire range of morally significant beings, but instead, we learn to psychologically position ourselves appropriately with respect to the morally significant beings involved in specific virtuous actions. We learn that the value of being courageous lies in overcoming our fear, and the value of being generous and compassionate, in considering the welfare of others. As the authors rightly note, correct psychological positioning typically involves a “decentering” of self and an orientation toward the other. (This does not seem to be true of self-regarding virtues, such as temperance, and some of the epistemic virtues, such as open-mindedness.) But we do not have to achieve this stance *tout court*—with respect to all morally significant beings—in order to attain and have it in the specific ways required by the various virtues.

This developmental picture makes sense because of the modular nature of the virtues. Each virtue is a disposition that can be conceptualized as a bundle of motivations, cognitions, and affective elements (see Snow, 2009). Each virtue has its distinctive sphere of applicability. Some motivations, cognitions, and affective elements can be shared between or among different virtues—for example, the desire to help another seems common to generosity and compassion, though it is shaped in different ways by motivational and cognitive elements specific to each virtue as well as by the circumstances in which the occasion for virtuous action arises. This way of conceptualizing the virtues and their exercise has explanatory power, for it enables us to explain how we can learn to be virtuous by acquiring specific virtues on a case-by-case basis yet extend what we know to new situations involving different virtues. The virtues are different enough to have their own distinctive natures and spheres of applicability yet share features which allow us to transfer knowledge of how to be virtuous from one virtue to another. As we learn generosity, for example, we learn that we should desire to help others in need—and this desire is also part of compassion. Moreover, the exercise of virtues in specific contexts can require seemingly unrelated virtues. To be generous or compassionate in certain circumstances might require courage, for example. Thus, the virtues, though modular, can overlap both in terms of shared elements intrinsic to each virtue, but also in terms of the requirements of action imposed on us by circumstances. Because of these complex areas of overlap, we can eventually reach the psychological positioning of self to other morally significant beings that the authors attribute to humility. But reaching this position, I surmise, takes a lot of thought and practice. Far from being a prerequisite for the full development of virtue, it is the achievement of repeated virtuous actions performed over time.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Christian Miller for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this commentary.

Notes

1. I thank Christian Miller for raising the important point (and providing examples) that not all forms of self-prioritizing are morally problematic. For example, when I water my garden but not my neighbor's, or submit my own article to a journal, I am self-prioritizing in a morally unproblematic way.
2. Christian Miller points out that it would be helpful to know how the authors measured high other-focus. It would be helpful to know specifically how many of their items were connected to compassion, and how many were not.

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6.3 Response to Schrader & Tangney and Snow Commentaries

Thomas Nadelhoffer and Jennifer Cole Wright

To begin, we would like to thank both Schrader & Tangney and Snow for their respective commentaries. They raised several important issues. Our response will begin where their concerns and criticisms overlap.

Overlapping Concerns—Snow and Schrader & Tangney

Across both commentaries a shared focal point was our second dimension of humility: *high other-focus*. Schrader & Tangney write, “The epistemic component—*low self-focus*—seems to us central to the construct of humility. From this perspective, humility is a quintessential ‘hypo-egoic’ virtue. ... In contrast, Nadelhoffer and Wright’s definition of ethical alignment or *high other-focus* appears to us to be an effect or downstream consequence rather than a core element of humility.” This is related to Snow’s worry about the connection we make between high other-focus and “extended compassion”—she writes, “Humility, it seems to me, is the virtue regulating how one regards oneself relative to a larger landscape. ... Humility, as the appropriate or proper view of oneself relative to these other possible landscapes, might not correlate with extended compassion.”

Both of these comments push us to be clearer about what we mean by high other-focus and why we think it an essential part of humility. To this end, let us make a couple of points. First, while it is certainly *possible* that what we’re calling “existential awareness” could be uncorrelated with what we’re calling “extended compassion,” our findings suggest instead that the two not only correlate with one another, but are two dimensions of a single, overarching construct of humility. And it’s not just that these two dimensions are “under the umbrella of humility”—to borrow a phrase from Schrader & Tangney—but rather, that they are at least partly constitutive of both the folk concept and the psychological construct of humility (for more on this, see Nadelhoffer, Wright, Echols, Perini, and Venezia, 2016;

Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2016). In short, we believe we have good reason to hold that the linguistic and psychological phenomena we're calling "humility"—rightly or wrongly—have these two key dimensions.

Second, whether "existential awareness" and "extended compassion" are the best terms for the linguistic and psychological items that were the target of our investigation is an open question. It's clear that the ambiguity of these terms (coupled with our earlier presentation of our views) invites multiple interpretations of what we have in mind. For instance, both commentaries seem to focus more on the *compassion* part of "extended compassion" than on the *extended* part—but for us, the latter is arguably the distinguishing feature of the kind of other-focus found in humility.

To better articulate why we think high other-focus is necessary for humility, let us return to the clearest statement of our account, which is that "... humility, at its core, is a *particular psychological positioning of oneself* within the larger context of the universe—one that is both *epistemically* and *ethically aligned*." To put it another way, humility is a particular experience of *oneself* in relation to *all else* (everything and everyone)—one that generates an epistemically and ethically aligned state of awareness of one's place alongside other morally relevant beings in the vast interconnected web of life traveling through the expanse of the cosmos. And while we each can come into and go out of states of humility—that is, people 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, such that one's mental states and behaviors are continuously informed and influenced by it.

As we see it, to be aware of oneself in relation to all else involves, at minimum, an awareness of *oneself* and an awareness of *all else*¹—thus, it naturally lends itself to *both* a shift in one's awareness of oneself and a shift in one's awareness of that to which oneself is in relation. In other words, states of humility generate not only an appropriate reduction in one's sense of self (one's importance, specialness, value, priority, etc.), but also a correspondingly heightened appreciation of everything else—of the vast and complex world of which one is a part and the myriad of living beings in it with you. We're calling the former of these shifts *low self-focus* and the latter *high other-focus* (though, here again, perhaps better labels for them could be found).

Of course, this is exactly what Snow and Schrader & Tangney call into question. According to both commentators, it seems that a person who manifests sufficient low self-focus could count as being humble even if he

or she does not manifest high other-focus (though presumably not vice versa). We disagree—as we discussed in our chapter for this volume, we believe our evidence suggests that *both* play an important role when it comes to the folk concept (Nadelhoffer et al., 2016) and the psychological construct (Wright et al., 2016) of humility. As counterintuitive or problematic as some philosophers and psychologists may find this view, it's the one we believe our findings support.

However, we also wonder, is it *really* that counterintuitive? If we consider the sorts of stories and images associated with humility, they often involve some form of service to others (such as the story of Jesus performing foot washing referenced in Matthew 26:14–39; Luke 22:24–27; John 13:1–17). Could someone truly be said to possess the *virtue* of humility if while in a state of low self-focus the person remained unmoved by the plight of those around him or her—unconcerned for their well-being? And while we agree with Snow that circumstances might arise where extended compassion may be unnecessary—as she writes, “... it doesn't make much sense to talk about having compassion for God or a higher spiritual power”—it is the *expression* of extended compassion within the humble person that is unnecessary in such instances, not its presence.

This is not to say, contra Schrader & Tangney, that we view these two dimensions as endpoints on a continuum. Indeed, we have evidence that the two can and do occasionally come apart. Rather, it's to say that when they do, neither dimension is individually sufficient for humility—without both, one cannot be said to be in a state of humility, or to possess the virtue.²

All that said, there is an important sense in which both commentators are correct. Our position is that humility is an experience of oneself in relation to all else that generates epistemically and ethically aligned states of awareness—thus, strictly speaking, everything else that follows from that is a *consequence* or *downstream effect* of humility. This is true for high other-focus—for example, appreciating the value of others, experiencing deep concern for their well-being, feeling connected to and responsible for the larger living world, and so forth. But it is *also* true for low self-focus—for example, being willing to acknowledge one's mistakes and imperfections, being open to new ideas and contradictory evidence,³ being modest in one's self-presentation/lifestyle, and so on. While it seems unlikely (to say the least) that such outcomes would not just automatically follow from epistemically and ethically aligned states of awareness, we can nonetheless imagine situations in which they might not.

In other words, one's awareness of one's finitude, fragility, and fallibility in the face of the vastness of which one is a part should *typically* result in an increased epistemic sensitivity to the possibility of error, a decreased sense of self-importance, an increased public and private modesty, and so forth—indeed, we'd arguably be justified in presuming that it *would*—but, nonetheless, it doesn't have to do so. Likewise, one's awareness of the shared moral status and value of the inner-connected “web of life” in which one is embedded should *typically* result in increased expressions of concern, interest, respect, care, and so forth—but it doesn't have to do so.

Other Concerns—Schrader & Tangney

In addition to this background worry about the relationship between existential awareness and extended compassion, Schrader & Tangney also express puzzlement over the specific subscales we generated with our humility scale, stating “...it is not clear how these particular domains (e.g., religious, cosmic, and environmental) of humility were selected. One could imagine many other possible humility subscales including humility in regard to physical attractiveness, intelligence, or wealth.” While we agree with Schrader & Tangney that people could certainly display humility in the context of their (and others') attractiveness, intelligence, and wealth—along with a wide variety of other contexts—what the religious and secular (cosmic/environmental) subscales are meant to represent is categorically different. That is, they do not represent a selection of some of the contexts within which people can display humility, but rather represent *different aspects* of one's awareness of oneself in relation to “all else.” In other words, they represent *ways in which we experience humility* (specifically, low self-focus) rather than *things that we are willing or able to be humble about*.

Schrader & Tangney also expressed concern about our using self-report methods to develop our scale because of the very real potential, especially in this instance, for social desirability or self-enhancement distortion. This is an important concern—one that we went to great lengths to control for at several different stages of data collection and scale development, the details of which were not presented here but can be found elsewhere (Wright, Nadelhoffer, and Ross, 2016; Wright, Nadelhoffer, Ross, and Sinnott-Armstrong, 2016). For example, during scale production we eliminated any scale items that were strongly correlated (> 0.4) with social desirability, as measured by the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Ballard, 1992). Additionally, when examining the scale's relationship to other moral and psychological attributes/capacities, we eliminated any

participants whose social desirability score was too strongly correlated (> 0.4) with any of the humility subscales or with the scale as a whole.

Finally, Schrader & Tangney expressed concern about the fact that people who are not religious might score lower on the scale than people who are: “Nadelhoffer and Wright address this issue by stating that one’s humility score represents greater or lesser opportunities for humility rather than higher or lower humility. Thus, we wonder whether this is truly a measure of humility or is a measure of potential to experience humility.” We think Schrader & Tangney are right to press us on this issue. While we certainly did adopt an “opportunities” approach in explaining our overall findings, perhaps it was a mistake to do so (for the reasons they suggest). Upon further reflection, we think these findings more likely have a developmental explanation. For instance, it strikes us as likely that religious children will encounter religious notions of humility early in their development—while secularly raised children aren’t likely to encounter cosmic/environmental humility until later. This creates different developmental “arcs” toward humility. As such, one would expect both children and adults who are high in religious humility to have different attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors than people who score low in religious humility yet high in the other subscales of our humility scale. And this is precisely what we found.

However, we don’t think it’s a straightforward function of an individual’s having more or fewer opportunities to be humble. One could have little to no opportunity for religious humility, just like one could have little to no opportunity for environmental humility. Conversely, one could be blessed with a multitude of opportunities for either kind—for example, by being born and raised in a church or at an environmentalist commune. Our scale both can and should be able to detect these differences. But that doesn’t show that the scale is merely a measure of people’s “potential to experience humility” as Schrader & Tangney suggest. It’s not about a person’s opportunities and potential to experience humility—it’s about the *nature* of the experiences themselves, and the relationship between these distinct yet related experiences and the overall construct of humility. In the case of both religious and environmental humility, we would argue that the same underlying existential awareness is generated in each—but the things that induce the awareness are different in each case.

Thus, different paths toward existential awareness exist. And each unique but related path produces overlapping, yet distinctive, patterns of beliefs, judgments, and behaviors—for example, not surprisingly, cosmic and environmental humility tend to go together, while religious humility has a distinct psychological profile. However, this doesn’t mean that one



path is any more important than the other, nor does it mean that religious people are “more humble” just because they have the opportunity to score higher on our scale (the scale need not be thought of additively in that way).

As we suggested above, we think that perhaps this can be best explained by the fact that different elements of humility come on board at different times in our lives and their unique developmental arcs can, in turn, influence downstream moral beliefs and behaviors. On this view, people introduced to religious humility early in life may end up on a different path to fully possessing the virtue of humility than those who don't. But secularity is not necessarily a hurdle to the full possession of humility. It simply represents a different avenue for arriving at the same phenomenological end—namely, the general awareness and appreciation of one's smallness in relation to something bigger (and more important) than oneself.

Other Concerns—Snow

We would like to now turn our attention to Snow's commentary. There are two main issues that she raises that we need to address. First, she makes the following observation, “... the authors seem to assume that our self-prioritization tendencies orient us naturally toward morally problematic behavior, which could include selfishness at the expense of others. ... If humility is indeed necessary for the full development of other virtues, it seems that to have it or seek it is, in a sense, unnatural, or as the authors put it, a corrective for certain natural tendencies. This would make the acquisition of any virtue difficult indeed.”

This is a fair point—and raises the important question about how much self-focus is *acceptable* (or *morally unproblematic*). Ethicists have long debated this issue—for example, the criticism that the impartiality demanded by consequentialism's moral calculus harms our integrity (Smart and Williams, 1973) and results in alienation (Railton, 1984). Our view on this is as follows: Psychologically, we are so constituted as to be naturally self-oriented—to prioritize ourselves (our desires, needs, beliefs, goals, hopes, fears, well-being, etc.) not only because they are the ones with which we are most intimately, deeply, and continuously familiar, but also because *they* (and not others) are *ours*. And it is a demanding morality indeed that renders this constitution immoral at the *prima facie* level, which is certainly not what we intended.

What we did intend was perhaps best captured by Johnston (2009) in the quote we introduced in the chapter, a section of which we repeat here:



...the central commandment of Christianity—to love one’s neighbor, indeed even one’s enemies, as oneself—is nothing less than an *identity-reconstituting* command. ... it requires that one love the arbitrary other as oneself, but it also requires that one love oneself objectively; that is, as just the arbitrary other whose life one is nonetheless called upon to lead....

To say it another way, we cannot change our psychological constitution and the fact that it creates for us *one* (and only one) life to be lived. We can, however, come to love that life *objectively*—recognizing it as just one life among many, the one we just happened to be called upon to live—while at the same time loving all those lives we were not called upon to live as much as we do our own.

In other words, while not damning our psychological constitution (and its natural self-prioritization) at the outset, we do maintain that it sets up a subjective way of experiencing the world that is ultimately *objectively untenable*—we simply are not, from the outside, worth all the fuss and attention and “special treatment” we tend to lavish upon ourselves.

This is not a new idea. Consider, for example, the extensive efforts on the part of parents, teachers, society, and so forth to expand children’s range of concern, to increasingly focus their attention outward, beyond even family and friends to the unknown other. And we view humility as, in part, the (momentary or stable) achievement of this more epistemically and ethically accurate subjective perspective—one that may very well be something that at least some of us are naturally inclined to experience, but nonetheless also one that most of us fail to ever achieve.

Finally, we turn to Snow’s second set of comments, having to do with humility’s status as a foundational moral virtue. First, she states the following: “They do not say whether they mean that humility is necessary for the full development of all of the other virtues (whatever they might be) in a person or for the full development of any virtue. I suspect they mean the latter.” We do indeed have this view in mind—in other words, what we are claiming is that the *mature possession* of any virtue is going to require the virtuous agent to be in an epistemically and ethically aligned state of awareness.

In response to this claim, Snow sketches an alternative, which relies on two interrelated points. The first point is that “...developmental aspects of virtue acquisition make it plausible to think that one can acquire the virtues in a piecemeal way. On this picture, one attains the rather exalted psychological positioning attributed to humility over the course of time, and as a result of development in virtue, not as its prerequisite.” We agree with Snow that the *virtue* of humility is likely to develop in a similar



“piecemeal” fashion—for example, through the experience of various transitory states of humility that bring things into larger perspective, resulting in a cascade of other attitudes, emotions, and behaviors that, over time (if all goes well), encourage the development of a more stable disposition. And the circumstances that give rise to such states, both initially and ongoing, will likely vary, both across people and across time (as we saw above). Alongside this development is the gradual development of other virtues—for example, we struggle with being generous and honest, not only in accurately recognizing the instances in which such virtues are called for, but in fully grasping what they require of us and why.

However, here is where humility plays a critical role. If we are able to evaluate the situation from within an epistemically and ethically aligned state of awareness, we can quiet the self-distortions that heighten one’s own needs and interests and/or downplay the needs and interests of others, threatening to “dampen” the virtuous response (e.g., resulting in only partial disclosure or the giving of less than was needed) or discourage it altogether.

Yet, it might also be, as Snow suggests, that other virtues develop first, contributing to the development of humility. Consider, for example, moments of “brutal honesty” or “insane generosity,” where those of us who are not yet maturely virtuous somehow find it within ourselves to get it right—to act so virtuously that it almost hurts. Such moments of virtue arguably have the power to transform one’s perspective, even after the fact, into a more epistemically and ethically aligned state of awareness. And we think this is fine. Our claim is not that humility is *developmentally prior* to mature virtue, but rather that it is *foundational* to it—one cannot be maturely virtuous (i.e., consistently and reliably engage in right action across a wide variety of contexts) without an epistemically and ethically aligned awareness.

Snow’s second point is that “...virtues have a modularity such that the possessor of a specific virtue can have the appropriate psychological positioning required for that virtue without having to have the appropriate psychological positioning required for other virtues, including that attributed by the authors to humility.” We take it that the modularity view is, at its heart, a denial of the strong “unity of virtues” thesis—and we are fine with this. Viewing humility as foundational to the mature expression of other virtues does not require a commitment to a unity thesis or anything resembling it. Indeed, we suppose that it’s possible (though not likely) that you could develop in such a way as to be only able to maturely express one other virtue. Nonetheless, the mature expression of that one other





virtue would require an epistemically and ethically aligned state of awareness.⁴

In essence, we are arguing that while other virtues—honesty, generosity, courage, and so on—may have (or be constituted by) psychological characteristics that are unique to each virtue, humility alone involves a psychological “positioning,” a state of awareness, that the expression of all fully developed, mature virtues must include. Without it, their expression will be imperfect, apt to be distorted or otherwise off the mark. This, we argue, is what makes humility foundational. However, developing and defending this view is the task for another day (see Wright and Nadelhoffer, 2016).

For now, we want to briefly highlight one of the ways our “foundationalist” thesis could be tested—something we hope to do ourselves in the near future. For starters, you could collect correlational data using a battery of scales designed to measure a wide variety of virtues. Based on these initial findings, primes could be developed for increasing and decreasing people’s scores on these scales—for example, designing primes that could decrease people’s scores on the humility scale or increase their scores on a courageousness scale. These primes could then be administered in conjunction with the scales. Our prediction is that when people are given primes that decrease/increase their scores on the humility scale, their scores on the other scales will decrease/increase as well. On the other hand, when people are given primes that decrease/increase their scores on another virtue—like courage—their scores on the other scales won’t be affected. In short, changes in humility should impact the expression of other virtues—while changes in any other virtue should not have the same “ripple” effect. Depending on the results, behavioral (and perhaps even longitudinal) studies could then be designed and conducted in an effort to further explore the thesis.

Of course, this is just one of several ways we might further test, explore, and support our foundationalist thesis moving forward. In the meantime, we would like to once again thank Schrader & Tangney and Snow for their thought-provoking commentaries. Their helpful remarks provided us with the opportunity to revisit and clarify some issues while forcing us to completely reconsider others. As a result, we would humbly like to think that some progress has been made. But we leave that for others to decide.

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Notes

1. This awareness might, in some instances, be an expansive awareness of “all else”—that is, everything around and beyond oneself (not unlike mystical experiences people sometimes report)—but it might also, in other instances, be of a particular “other,” such as family and friends, or a room full of strangers, or a living creature you encounter, and so forth. In the latter cases, however, we’d argue that one’s awareness of a specific other remains framed within this more expansive sense of “all else,” which is operating in the background.
2. So, for example, low self-focus without high other-focus might be a state of deep existential anxiety—a possibility that we have at least preliminary (and currently unpublished) correlational data to support.
3. We should be clear here that our account is of the moral virtue of humility—not the epistemic virtue of what is often referred to as “intellectual” humility. Nonetheless, it seems right to us to hold that the moral virtue of humility not only has an epistemic component (hence the *epistemic* alignment), but has epistemic significance. In other words, people with the moral virtue of humility will naturally be more open to new information, to divergent ideas, beliefs, and practices—attributes we might reasonably expect from the intellectually humble—though their reasons for being so may be different (e.g., they may be so because of their reduced concern for self-oriented rewards and increased respect for their fellow human beings as rational moral agents, whereas the intellectually humble may simply appreciate the fact that human fallibility means that intellectual progress is best made through collaborative efforts).
4. Of course, if this is right, then it suggests that it would be natural to codevelop many, if not all, of the virtues—since, from a state of epistemic and ethical alignment, the reasons for responding honestly are as clear and compelling as the reasons for responding honorably, generously, bravely, and so on. Practically speaking, then, what would stand in the way of virtue unity would likely be external to the virtues themselves—that is, the temperamental or constitutional facts about the

virtuous agent and/or environmental conditions in which the agent finds himself or herself.

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