

The Pervasive Power of Humility

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Abstract

Unlike more conspicuous moral virtues such as courage or generosity, humility works behind the scenes, in a fittingly humble manner. It may be somewhat surprising, then, to realize the force that humility actually exerts in our moral lives. The pervasive power of humility is found especially in how it encourages other virtues. Besides the moral conduct that results directly from its nature, humility is exceptional, though perhaps not unique, in promoting the maintenance and deployment of other virtues as well. After a brief sketch of humility, several virtues encouraged by humility are examined: patience, gratitude and forgiveness. The indirect way in which humility operates is then distinguished from the direct impact of other virtues when they augment companion virtues. The conclusion suggests how humility also inhibits such vices as envy and injustice. The result should be a deeper appreciation for humility's indirect, yet profound influence on moral character.

Keywords: Gratitude, Patience, Injustice, Envy, Virtue, Vice

I

Humility is a quiet virtue, unobtrusive. Unlike more conspicuous moral traits such as courage or generosity, humility works behind the scenes; like patience, it is itself humble. It may be somewhat surprising, then, to realize the force that humility actually exerts. The pervasive power of humility is found especially in its impact on other virtues. Besides the moral conduct that results directly from its nature, humility is exceptional, though perhaps not unique, in promoting the maintenance and deployment of other virtues as well. After a brief sketch of humility, several virtues that are encouraged by humility will be examined. I will then consider how humility, besides furthering specific virtues, works in the opposite direction to inhibit various vices. The way humility operates will then be distinguished from the manner in which virtues more typically support the exercise of their companion virtues. The analysis of the ramifications of humility concludes with consideration of the way in which another virtue parallels humility in its indirect, augmenting power. The result should be a deeper appreciation for humility's subtle, yet profound influence on our moral lives.

Humility involves having an accurate assessment of ourselves. Following Aristotle, it is a mean between the arrogance of people who think too highly of themselves and the self-denigration of individuals who do not esteem themselves highly enough. As such, humility encompasses our technical abilities or accomplishments as well as our moral character. Humble people do not dismiss or diminish their own abilities or achievements, but have a realistic sense of them. Humility keeps us even-keeled when we appraise our accomplishments. My recently published philosophy paper may not be at the level of Bernard Williams's work, but it is certainly cogently reasoned and has been well-received. As for character, humility enables me to be fairly clear-headed about my moral strengths and shortcomings. While I may be fairly honest and generous, I am aware that I am lacking in patience and gentleness. I see myself as a decent person, but hardly on a par with Mother Teresa.

People with humility keep their abilities and achievements in perspective in another way as well. The perspective of humility is informed by appreciation for how much of our talent, achievement—even moral character—is contingent on forces outside us, beyond our control and responsibility. We realize that our abilities and successes have depended on genetic endowment, parental nurture, social advantages, or just plain good luck: the outcome for us of the natural and social lotteries. For example, Bill Gates not only is blessed with a fine mind, but growing up he had access to an excellent education as well as state of the art computer technology. Keeping all these unearned advantages in mind is ingredient to the perspective of humility: a perspective on ourselves, in the first place, but one that necessarily has implications for our relationships with other people.

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The perspectival nature of humility finds expression in its characterization of aspects of everyday life quite apart from its moral meaning. We speak of humble origins, humble work, and humble abodes. Even as its Latin root, “humus,” means of the earth or soil, so are humble individuals down to earth. Being “grounded” in who they are and what they actually do, those with humility tend to be without illusions or pretense with regard to themselves. The unpretentious, earthbound orientation keeps people with humility from getting carried away with their achievements, even when they are noteworthy. Because humility includes acknowledging the beneficial influence of other people and circumstances on our abilities, we realize that others might have done as well with a few of the fortunate breaks we enjoyed. In this respect, humility resembles other virtues in possessing inherent value--the good found in realistic self-assessment.

Proper self-estimation is a good thing and, as with other virtues, it will issue in its own sub-class of moral actions. We find humility expressed in diverse daily conduct, such as not seeking the limelight or making invidious comparisons with others, freely giving credit to other people, and accepting praise graciously. So much is typical of virtue in general. Courage, generosity, and patience, for instance, find direct expression in behavior that is beneficial to others as well as ourselves. What sets humility apart is the way in which it also fosters the maintenance and manifestation of other virtues. Humility promotes an array of virtues, from patience to forgiveness and gratitude. In this way, humility serves as a virtue of virtues. Just as particular virtues dispose us to perform or refrain from behavior that falls within their domain, so does the domain of humility include other virtues. Insofar as humility encourages the exercise of an assortment of virtues, we can consider it a second-order virtue, in addition to its place in our lives as a first-order moral trait.

II

Humility encourages the virtues of patience, gratitude, and forgiveness. Patience is the habit of being able to wait calmly for time to pass when waiting is unavoidable or good. Patience also characterizes the performance of tasks at a pace and manner that increases the likelihood that they will bear fruit. Patient people do not become upset at waiting in line at the supermarket, the tardy arrival of an airplane, or the grind of navigating a new computer program. Humility fosters unperturbed waiting and execution for several reasons. Besides awareness of our own limitations in solving problems, we realize that we must adapt to untoward contingencies, such as traffic congestion, bad weather and malfunctioning machines. Humility keeps us mindful that our interests and priorities will often not coincide with those of other people. Because our claims on the attention or alacrity of others are liable to be unexceptional, we do not expect people to snap to our beck and call. Not seeing ourselves as more important than other individuals, a facet of humility, enables us to accept human delays in getting our needs met.

The power of humility to fortify patience is underscored by contrasting it with its associated vice of arrogance. Arrogant individuals overestimate their value or significance in the world and in comparison with others. The condescension that characterizes arrogance is rooted in a sense of superiority. Whether the superiority is technical (excellence at engineering or basketball, for example) or moral (a wealth of virtues), the arrogant individual feels a sense of entitlement. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s imperious treatment of other individuals is traced on one analysis to his arrogance. (Tiberius and Walker 1998:382). He was often impatiently demanding of associates because he thought he was superior to them, primarily in matters of intellect.

Yet this very sense of entitlement undermines the virtue of patience. People who are arrogant mistakenly believe that individuals with whom they interact should drop what they are doing, discount the needs of other parties, and attend to their particular demands. This belief, along with the expectations of privilege that accompany it, breeds impatience. Humility is a natural brake on such tendencies. Keeping our value and importance in the proper perspective limits our expectations. We do not unrealistically expect that our interests will or should take precedence over those of other people. Consequently, patience comes more easily to those with humility than would otherwise be the case.

Humility also promotes the virtue of gratitude. People who possess humility are aware that their talents and accomplishments depend upon fortuitous influences for which they are not responsible. Recall that natural gifts, nurturing parents or teachers, and the opportunity afforded by social institutions are among the various conditions that are practically necessary for ability or achievement in any sphere of life. Cognizant of their indebtedness to others and circumstances for their success, gratitude comes easily to people with humility. Because they readily perceive what has been given them without being especially deserving, humble individuals do not mistakenly think they are solely responsible for who they are or what they achieve; quite naturally, they are disposed to feeling and expressing the virtue of gratitude.

When people perform a service for humble individuals, moreover, they are more likely than not to perceive it as a favor instead of thinking that it is owed them. On the other hand, arrogant people will be lacking in gratitude when it is called for. Since they are superior to those with whom they interact, surely they deserve the

advantages or windfalls they receive. Because humility keeps our status with regard to other people in perspective, it keeps us from viewing benefits bestowed as our due and this, of course, invites gratitude.

Consider next how humility is an impetus for forgiveness. The virtue is the disposition to forgive those who commit offenses against us or wrongly harm us. Forgiving someone is a process that begins in acknowledging the wrongfulness of another's actions and our own resentment. It includes trying to understand the individual from her own point of view and history, and culminates in dissipation of the hostility, with accompanying good will, toward the offender. Because we no longer consider the wrongdoer in our debt, we either tacitly or publicly release her from the accompanying burden that comes from having unjustly harmed us. As Norvin Richards points out, humility inclines us toward forgiveness (1988: 257-58). Centuries earlier, Bernard of Clairvaux observed that the awareness of our own flaws and weaknesses intrinsic to humility makes us merciful and gentle with other people (1985: 31). There may be subtle differences between mercy and forgiveness, but at least on the face of it, mercy seems to be an outgrowth of forgiveness as well as its institutionalized, legal expression.

III

Next, consider several vices that humility curtails. Besides the virtues shown to be promoted by humility, this modest virtue also inhibits the vices of vanity, envy and injustice. It should not be surprising that humility puts the brakes on vanity since vanity is a close cousin of arrogance, one of the two vicious extremes to which humility is plainly opposed. Where arrogance is a generalized inflated sense of self-worth, vanity fastens on some personal attribute or possession, such as one's appearance, wealth, station or achievement. A.T. Nuyen observes that, "The vain person craves the attention of others, seeks to be noticed by others" (1999: 616). This individual wishes to be seen, and seen as possessing something of value that others lack, such as "surrounding oneself in luxury, or showing off items of social prestige such as money, status, titles, positions, and fame" (1999:614).ⁱ

Humility naturally curbs vanity in several ways. First, the humble individual does not spend much time thinking about herself: her abilities, possessions or attainments. Consequently, the typical objects of vanity do not occupy her attention in great degree or extent. Secondly, when the humble person does have occasion to reflect on things that typically evoke vanity, she realizes the extent to which she has benefited from conditions or circumstances beyond her control, such as natural gifts, the nurture of others, and a propitious social environment. As indicated, such reflection is an impetus for gratitude rather than the distorted exaggeration of one's value that fuels vanity. We are not liable to seek admiration for attributes, achievements, or station that we understand ourselves to be fortunate to enjoy. The moral perspective of humility orients us to view our appearance as the luck of the DNA draw, our wealth as funded by the help of others, and our privileged station conferred by family or society.

Vicious envy is different from the benign variety. As John Rawls notes, we sometimes "remark upon the enviable harmony and happiness of a marriage" (1999: 308). Yet such observations are a form of praise, affirming the value of the thing possessed. When they indicate an individual's wish for the object, attribute or relationship, they are not accompanied by malice. Vicious envy, on the other hand, involves feeling hostility toward people who have what is coveted. Individuals not only desire the object or attribute, such as wealth or talent or a lovely mate, but they wish that the person who does enjoy the prized possession did not have it and perhaps came to harm. The hostility may result in trying to deprive the individual of the desirable thing, or in belittling its value.ⁱⁱ

Humility curbs envy of the vicious kind to the extent that the vice is grounded in being deprived of something to which the individual feels he is entitled. For example, Iago envies Cassio because Cassio receives the promotion and esteem of Othello that Iago believes is rightfully his. Consequently, Iago schemes to deprive Cassio of his favored position. But humility is precisely the virtue that keeps one's sense of entitlement in check through the perception of one's limitations or flaws and the corresponding strengths of other people. Humility thereby reduces the likelihood of sliding into the destructive vortex of envious ideation and emotion.

Something similar is at work when humility inhibits the vice of injustice. Insofar as injustice arises from a sense of undue desert, humility vouchsafes people from this vice. Some injustice is the product of people believing they deserve more than they actually do; however, not all injustice has this as its root. After all, people may behave unjustly as a result of having false beliefs about the moral status of groups of people (such as women or Blacks), or folks may simply fail to see oppression or unfair distribution of benefits for what they are. Even in these cases, however, the consequence of error or blindness typically yields the mistaken view that individuals are entitled to more than what is actually their share. Although humility cannot guarantee that this does not occur (nothing can), it naturally makes people leery of embracing such beliefs or attitudes too quickly or thoughtlessly.

Because a sense of self-worth is in perspective with regard to the importance of other people, individuals are inclined to question arrangements that favor them at the expense of others.

IV

The impact of humility on other virtues is distinctive in that it facilitates them indirectly, mediated by the perspective on the self. On the other hand, when most virtues function as auxiliaries to companion virtues, they work more directly. The virtue of patience, considered earlier, nicely illustrates an alternative to the *modus operandi* of humility. Patience is an instrumental virtue in that it is a means to the attainment of various ends. Unlike substantive virtues that supply us with objectives (such as generosity or justice), instrumental virtues help us achieve various goals, including the exercise of still other virtues.ⁱⁱⁱ Because we are patient, for example, we are able to be effective in our generosity. Patience enables us to take our time evaluating the needs of others and figuring out how to help them. If we rush to help, we are liable to do harm by overlooking a pivotal feature of the needy person's plight.

Patience is also necessary for, if not ingredient to, perseverance. How can we persist in working through difficult problems unless we are willing to take the requisite time to do so? In such cases, patience is directly instrumental in facilitating the expression of another virtue. In contrast, the virtuous influence of humility is more diffuse and indirect. In informing our perspective on ourselves, humility so shapes our outlook that it encourages virtues as diverse as patience, forgiveness and gratitude.

Returning to the psychology of forgiveness affords an example of another auxiliary virtue that contrasts with humility in its immediate moral effects. The virtue that immediately and directly instigates forgiveness would seem to be something like compassion. Compassion or sympathy for offenders enables us to step outside our viewpoint to understand their wrongdoing, uncolored by personal antipathy or moral judgment. It frees us from our own subjective response toward offenders and their harmful behavior. On the other hand, humility is once-removed from the process of forgiving. It operates in the background, underlying our view of ourselves and offenders. Viewing ourselves realistically, including our own failings, enables us to sympathize with people who have wronged us. Even if we are morally better than these individuals, such superiority is not decisive. After all, we are morally closer to such miscreants than we are to a saintly or ideal person. So, where compassion feeds into forgiveness directly, the way a tributary flows into a river, humility promotes forgiveness indirectly, the way rainfall or snowmelt swells a river.

The place of humility in undergirding other virtues seems analogous to confidence in playing sports or experience of the world in writing. Making shots in golf or basketball is surely the direct outcome of practicing these shots in the respective sports. But confidence in one's ability plays an indirect, underlying role. The person with confidence shoots baskets and swings her golf club in a relaxed but focused manner, rather than tentatively. Or, consider, writing poetry. Good writing is a skill developed over time filled with revision and experimentation. Knowledge of poetic forms and rhythms is clearly of direct benefit. However, a general background of worldly experience and language use can inform good writing of poetry in the more diffuse manner of humility.

Not only does humility differ from the direct influence of other virtues that promote virtue, but it should also be distinguished from the epitome of the virtue's virtue--practical wisdom. Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, is the most celebrated of virtues that are instrumental to the effectiveness of other virtues. Indeed, it has been considered necessary (by some) to the proper exercise of practically all the subordinate virtues. But *phronesis* works from above, as it were, like a beacon. It points the various virtues in the right direction and otherwise governs their exercise by means of understanding human nature or astute estimation of life's contingencies. Practical wisdom governs the other virtues, supplying them with needed judgment. Where *phronesis* operates from above the virtues in question, humility buttresses them from below, and remains apart. It is easily overlooked, because it plows along beneath the radar.

This is not to say that humility is a necessary condition for the virtues it fosters (as *phronesis* may well be). Any number of psychological attributes could account for patience, for instance: a natural ease, self-discipline, tutelage, or desires that are not terribly strong, to name a few. The claim here is simply that when humility is present, the perspective on our own worth and place in the world fans outward, coloring our attitude--for example, about the propriety of waiting for our interests to be met or our desires satisfied. The same is no doubt true for forgiveness and gratitude. People are complex and the wellsprings of their virtues are likely as myriad as the sources of their vices.

V

Although humility's indirect manner of promoting other virtues diverges from the typical way virtues support neighboring moral dispositions, it does not seem to be unique in this respect. For example, friendliness might be considered another plausible candidate. Friendliness toward others puts individuals in the way of being cooperative, sympathetic, and generous. People who are friendly strike up conversation easily and look for occasions to be helpful or supportive. Friendly individuals put other people at their ease and this in turn makes them accessible to work with others, listen sympathetically and discern ways to meet their needs. As with humility, friendliness is an orientation, only here it is directed in the first place toward others, not (as with humility) toward the self. Friendly individuals are amicably disposed toward others rather than being reserved, wary or aloof. And while this can certainly be misplaced, it is a catalyst for such virtues as those just mentioned.

The power of humility is pervasive because its effects ripple out beyond the virtuous attitudes and conduct that flow directly from its makeup. The characteristic perspective of humility encourages the psychology and behavior that define the companion virtues of patience, forgiveness and gratitude. In addition, humility is a natural impediment to the emergence and expression of such vices as vanity, envy and injustice. Like a subterranean scaffolding, humility supports large portions of our moral character. It is reasonable to think that other moral traits, such as friendliness, resemble humility in unobtrusively and indirectly buttressing virtue and dampening vice. Whether they possess the scope of humility is worth investigating.

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ⁱ. Kant regards envy as a perverse kind of ambition. Morally justified ambition is the outgrowth of a "true love of honour... being honoured for personal worth," whereas "to aim at gaining respect by dress, or by titles, or by any other things which are not inherent in our person is vanity" (1963:188). Just as sexual lust is a perverse form of genuine love for another person, so this "lust" for honour is a perversion of the morally proper "love" of honour.

ⁱⁱ. See Gabriel Taylor, "Envy and Jealousy: Emotions and Vices."

ⁱⁱⁱ. For a clear discussion of this distinction see Robert C. Roberts, "Will Power and the Virtues."