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Jason Baehr

Loyola Marymount University, jason.baehr@lmu.edu

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Two Concepts of Intellectual Humility

Jason Baehr
Loyola Marymount University

There are at least two broadly plausible ways of thinking about the nature of intellectual humility. According to the “no concern” (NC) account, intellectual humility is (roughly) an *absence* of concerns characteristic of the vice (or vices) of intellectual pride. According to the “limits-owning” (LO) account, intellectual humility is a matter (roughly) of “owning” one’s intellectual limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes.¹

Both accounts have a basis in Christian philosophical and theological reflection on humility *simpliciter* or *moral* humility. Many Christian writers have portrayed humility as involving an honest, if not a low, estimation of one’s moral attributes or status. The LO account of intellectual humility is of a piece with these views.² The NC account of intellectual humility also takes its inspiration from Christian sources. Consider Christ’s *kenosis*, as described by the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the church at Philippi:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Phillipians 2: 5-7, *ESV*)

For defenders of the NC account, Christ manifests humility, not by owning his limitations, but by showing a lack of concern for his divine status, “taking the form of a servant” and becoming “obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

While both views of intellectual humility enjoy support from Christian ethical and theological reflection, they are notably distinct. In fact, they are different enough that it can be

difficult to adjudicate between them. How are the two accounts related? Is one more plausible than the other? These and related questions will be the focus of the present chapter.

My immediate concern will be specific *versions* or *formulations* of the NC and LO accounts that have received considerable attention in the recent literature. Specifically, I'll be examining a version of the NC account defended by Robert Roberts (and occasional co-authors) across several recent papers and a version of the LO account defended by Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and me in a 2015 paper titled "Intellectual Humility: Owing our Limitations." My aim is to defend this version of the LO account against some recent criticisms by Roberts and to subject his version of the NC account to some criticisms of my own. I begin with an overview of both views. I then consider and respond to two objections to the LO account. Next I offer a critical assessment of the NC account. I conclude by drawing attention to an implication of both accounts regarding the process of fostering intellectual humility in children and adolescents.

1. The "No Concern" Account

Roberts's formulation of the NC account can be understood in terms of three main claims. The first, noted above, is that intellectual humility consists of a *lack* or *absence* of concern with considerations a concern for which is characteristic of over a dozen different "vices of intellectual pride," including intellectual "vanity, pretentiousness, impertinence, arrogance, presumptuousness, domination, hyper-autonomy, refractoriness, invidious pride (with envy, its obverse twin), snobbery, haughtiness, self-righteousness, selfish ambition, grandiosity, and self-complacency" (Roberts manuscript, 2). Each of these vices brings with it certain concerns or preoccupations, for example, a concern for intellectual status, prestige, honors, regard, glory, adulation, entitlements, privilege, superiority, domination, power, control, or credit (2-6; Roberts

and Cleveland 2016). Roberts imposes some helpful order on this variegated landscape by grouping the vices of intellectual pride into four categories: vices of “regard” (e.g. intellectual vanity, pretentiousness, and grandiosity), vices of “privilege” (e.g. intellectual arrogance, impertinence, and presumptuousness), vices of “control” (e.g. intellectual domination, hyper-autonomy, and refractoriness), and vices of “superiority” (e.g. intellectual conceit, haughtiness, and invidious pride) (Roberts manuscript, 6).³ Accordingly, on Roberts’s view, an intellectually humble person is free of the concerns and preoccupations characteristic of at least four different types of vices of intellectual pride.

A second tenet of Roberts’s formulation of the NC account is that the vices of intellectual pride in terms of which intellectual humility is negatively defined are rooted in a “concern for self-importance,” which he describes as follows: “Concern about your self-importance is the kind of concern you have if you aspire to be a ‘big shot’ just for the sake of being important” (manuscript, 4). Elsewhere he says: “Self-importance is the idea that people express when they say someone has a ‘big ego.’ ... What do people who have a big ego want? Typically, they want such things as social status, glory, credit, adulating attention, honor, superiority, special entitlements, prestige, and power. Why do they want these things? They want them because these things make them important” (Roberts and Cleveland 2016, 4). Thus a viciously prideful epistemic agent seeks intellectual status, glory, credit, and so on out of or as a way of achieving a sense of self-importance. An intellectually humble person, by contrast, is free of a concern for self-importance, and so is free of a certain kind of excessive or inappropriate concern with intellectual status, glory, influence, and related aspirations.

A third tenet of Roberts’s view stipulates a positive motivational dimension of intellectual humility. To see the importance of this dimension, note that a person could lack a

concern with self-importance as result, say, of suffering from severe depression or having had a lobotomy (manuscript, 2; 2016, 186; Roberts and Cleveland 2016, 9). Given that such a person is unlikely to count as intellectually humble, Roberts claims that the kind of self-importance proper to intellectual humility is “intelligent” in the sense of being explainable in terms of a positive concern for knowledge and related epistemic goods. In the psychology of the intellectual humble agent, any intrinsic concern with status, honors, privilege, and so on, is “muted” or “sidelined” by a deeper and overriding epistemic motivation (Roberts and Wood 2007, 250).

Roberts provides a nice illustration of his view of in a description of G.E. Moore penned by one of Moore’s former students: “Moore in his lectures was self-effacing. Criticisms he put forward of claims he himself had made, say in a previous lecture, could as well have been directed to an anonymous philosopher whose mistakes called for correction.” In one particular lecture, Moore argued that the phrase “it is true that” is meaningless on the grounds that an expression of the form “it is true that *p*” is redundant. The next class period he reversed course, saying: “[F]ar from its being the case that from the fact that [“it is true that”] is redundant it follows that it has no meaning, it follows that if it is redundant *it has got meaning*. No phrase can be redundant in an expression without having a meaning” (240). Freely and comfortably correcting what some might regard as an obvious intellectual error, Moore evinces both a sharp concern for accuracy and a low concern for how his mistake might cause him to be perceived by his students.

2. The “Limits-Owning” Account

According to the LO account, IH is a matter of “owning” one’s intellectual limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes. More precisely, on the version of the LO account considered here, intellectual humility consists of (1) an appropriate attentiveness to and (2) a disposition to “own”

one's intellectual limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes.⁴ Intellectual "limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes" include, among other things, gaps in one's knowledge, intellectual mistakes, unreliable cognitive processes (e.g. a poor memory), deficits in learnable skills (e.g. being "bad at math"), and intellectual character flaws (e.g. a tendency to draw hasty conclusions) (Whitcomb *et al*, 8). Being "appropriately attentive" to one's intellectual limitations is, at a minimum, a matter of not being *ignorant* of or *oblivious* to them. But neither is an intellectually humble person *overly* attentive to her intellectual limitations. She does not obsess about them. Rather, she is aware that they exist, and they appear "on her radar" on an appropriate basis, particularly when they threaten to undermine the quality of her intellectual activity (8-9).

While necessary, being appropriately attentive to one's intellectual limitations is not sufficient for intellectual humility. To see why, consider how a person might respond to an awareness of her intellectual limitations or defects. She might work hard to *conceal* them, feel extremely *anxious* about them, or react *defensively* when they are brought to her attention. These responses run contrary to intellectual humility. To account for this, the LO account includes the further stipulation that an intellectually humble person also is disposed to "own" her intellectual limitations (9-12). The exact form that "owning" takes is likely to vary depending on the situation and limitation in question. At a minimum, "owning" a limitation involves acknowledging, to oneself or others, that it exists. If the limitation is a *defect* or *flaw*, "owning" it is also likely to involve a certain commitment or intention. For instance, if I feel like I always need to have the last word in philosophical discussions, then if I "own" this limitation, it is not enough that I simply acknowledge its existence. Rather, I must also resolve to *do something about it*, that is, to begin letting others have the final word. In cases where the defect is more fixed or permanent (e.g. bad eyesight or a poor memory), while "owning" this limitation may not

require an intention to get rid of it, it is likely to require a commitment to preventing the limitation from manifesting in my future epistemic activity (e.g. a commitment to not place too much confidence in judgments based on my poor vision or memory).

On the other hand, if the limitation is a *mere* limitation (i.e. if it is not a flaw or defect), then the kind of second-order responsiveness just described may be unnecessary. Take, for instance, the limitation that I cannot know everything I really would like to know (so many interesting topics, so little time). To “own” this limitation, I must in some sense “take it to heart.” While this presumably will involve admitting (at least to myself) that the limitation exists, it will not demand that I form an intention to weed out the limitation or prevent it from manifesting in my future cognitive activity. On the contrary, “owning” this limitation will involve “keeping it in view” and *refraining* from trying to overcome or transcend it.

Finally, on our version of the LO account, to qualify as a full-blooded intellectual virtue, a person’s attentiveness to and disposition to “own” her intellectual limitations must be motivated by an interest in epistemic goods (12-13).⁵ An intellectually humble person’s habit of “limits-owning” will reflect and be guided by her interest in reaching the truth or acquiring knowledge. Our account is similar in this respect to Roberts’s account: both characterize the motivational basis of intellectual humility in terms of something like a desire for or “love” of epistemic goods.

In *I Don’t Know: In Praise of Admitting Ignorance* (2013), author Leah Hager Cohen provides an illustration of the LO account of intellectual humility in a description of her “well-read” and “incredibly smart” colleague Mary. Mary routinely exhibits an unusual response when “she’s having a conversation and the other person mentions a book or author in that way that assumes she’s familiar with the work.” Cohen explains: “You know when you’re with people

you want to impress, people you find a little intimidating? Maybe you're feeling kind of dumb, like you don't really belong with them. You're worried you'll be found out. And someone mentions a writer or the title of a book in this tone like, *Naahh-turally you know what I'm talking about*. And even though you have no clue, you do that little thing where you narrow your eyes and purse your lips and give this thoughtful nod." Mary's response in these situations? "She says, 'I don't know that book.' She says, 'I've never heard of that person'" (10-11). Instead of trying to conceal her ignorance from her interlocutors, Mary readily "owns" it.

3. Objections to the "Limits-Owning" Account

In a recent paper, "The Nature of Humility: Three Proposals" (manuscript), Roberts raises a pair of objections to the present formulation of the LO account. In the present section, I summarize and respond to each objection.

3.1 Problems with "Owning"

The upshot of Roberts's first objection is that the LO account successfully excludes the vices of intellectual pride only by way of artificial stipulation. Assuming, correctly, that the notion of "owning" is intended to exclude the possibility that a person might "own" her intellectual limitations while also being, say, intellectually hyper-autonomous or envious, Roberts says:

Having gone this far, they might reply to *any* counterexample we contrive on the basis of a vice of pride by saying that a person who deals with his limitations in *that* way doesn't count as 'properly' attending to them or 'owning' them. We can foresee, I think, that when Whitcomb *et al* say (p. 11) that much remains to be said about 'owning,' they stand ready to load huge and largely artificial normative content into that notion ... indeed, that they are ready to freight them with anything that is needed to wipe every vice of self-importance from the character of the person who is 'properly' attentive to and 'owns' his limitations. (10-11)

Is the notion of "owning" one's intellectual limitations and mistakes objectionably artificial? While my co-authors and I do offer some support for thinking this concept has a

presence in ordinary thought and language (11-12), and thus that it is not purely stipulative, I will briefly expand on that case here. I will then discuss some quasi-theoretical considerations that render a complementary picture.

The concept of “owning” a limitation crops up in at least three familiar non-technical contexts. First is the context of *relational conflict*. When reflecting on a disagreement between two parties, we sometimes speak of the need for one or more of them to “own their shit.” What we have in mind in such cases is not a blithe acknowledgement of personal shortcomings. If person A wrongs person B, tersely admits to having done so, but then immediately launches into a litany of excuses for his behavior, or begins itemizing B’s contribution to the conflict, A will have failed to “own” his shortcomings. “Owning” in this sense is at odds with the kind of defensiveness and blaming characteristic of vicious pride.

The language of “owning” is also familiar in the context of *addiction rehabilitation*. According to one rehab website, the “first step of recovery” is “owning your addiction.” It says: “Owning your addiction means acknowledging to yourself, and others, that addiction has become a part of your life – it’s a part of who you are. Once you are able to acknowledge that, and face up to that difficult fact, you can start to take control of your addiction, and your life.”⁶ This is hardly an unusual statement in the discourse and literature surrounding addiction. Notably, it makes explicit use of a concept of “owning” that has a strong normative component. Here as well we would be rightly suspicious of a person who claimed to “own” her addiction but remained highly defensive or irritable about its existence, blamed others for her possession of it, and so on.

Finally, talk of “owning” also crops up in *performance* contexts. In our defense of the LO account, we cite the following remarks from Miami Heat head coach Eric Spoelstra following a

game three loss during the 2014 NBA finals: “We did not play a good basketball game. All of us have owned that. It doesn’t matter ultimately how many you lose by or what the game is like. You have to learn from it, and move on” (Whitcomb *et al*, 11). Remarks like these are relatively commonplace (albeit perhaps not commonplace enough) in contexts in which a person or group is struggling to come to terms with a poor performance. To “own” a poor performance in such contexts is to accept and take responsibility for it. It is firmly opposed to denying that the failure occurred or placing the blame for it on other agents (e.g. bad refereeing, unfair play on the part of the other team, etc.). I conclude, contra Roberts’s argument, that there is a familiar, non-stipulative notion of what it is to “own” a limitation or failure that has a strong normative dimension, and specifically, a normative dimension at odds with the sorts of actions and attitudes characteristic of vicious pride.⁷

This perspective is reinforced by some quasi-theoretical reflections on the human predicament. Note, first, that our existence is rife with limitations. This includes *physical* limitations (e.g. our bodies are subject to decay and death), *metaphysical* limitations (e.g. we cannot be in more than one place at a time or create things *ex nihilo*), *psychological* limitations (e.g. our egos are fragile, prone to destabilization in the face of unmet needs and desires, abuse, trauma, etc.), and *moral* limitations (e.g. we tend all too often toward selfishness and violence, and our ability to effect moral change in ourselves or others is limited at best). It also includes *epistemic* limitations: we are not omniscient, our cognitive faculties are fallible, our intellectual characters are flawed, we are subject to myriad biases, we employ unreliable heuristics, etc.⁸

Second, a further characteristic of our species is that we often seek to deny, resist, or transcend the limitations that pervade our existence. While this response to our limitations, epistemic and otherwise, can be entirely reasonable and beneficial, often enough it comes at a significant cost

to our well-being or to the well-being of others. We foolishly attempt the superhuman, endeavor to control others, rationalize our mistakes, resist getting the care we need, deny our mortality, demand certainty, conceal our ignorance, and so much more. Third, given the pervasiveness of limitations to our existence together with our often-counterproductive tendency to deny or resist them, if we wish to flourish and help others do the same, we must become skilled at appropriately *acknowledging, accepting, and taking responsibility for our limitations*. Such competence is no small part of what it is to live well and wisely as human beings.⁹

On the present view, the notion of “owning” is intended to pick out the *epistemic* dimension of the kind of limitations-relevant personal orientation and competence just described. An intellectually humble person, as we are thinking of her, is aware of and apt to negotiate well the terrain of her intellectual limitations—particularly where this terrain calls for accepting or taking responsibility for, rather than overcoming or transcending, one’s intellectual limitations. This point further underscores that our concept of “owning” is not objectionably artificial or stipulative. It has not been manufactured merely or conveniently to rule out expressions of vicious intellectual pride. On the contrary, it picks out a familiar and indispensable personal-*cum*-epistemic competence.

3.2 Intellectual Humility without “Owning”

I turn now to consider Roberts’s second objection to the LO account. Roberts identifies a series of cases in which a person seems to manifest humility but not on account of owning any limitations, weaknesses, or mistakes. At least two of these cases are cases of humility *simpliciter* (vs. *intellectual* humility). However, Roberts and I agree that intellectual humility can be understood (roughly) as humility *simpliciter* applied to distinctively *epistemic* activities and pursuits (Roberts and Wood 2007, 60; Roberts 2016, 189). Therefore, I will treat these cases as

relevant to the LO account of intellectual humility. Consistent with this, the immediate focus in this section will alternate between humility *simpliciter* and intellectual humility.

The first case, noted above, is central to Christian ethics: it is the *kenosis* or “self-emptying” of Christ. Again, according to the Apostle Paul, while existing “in the form of God,” Jesus did not regard “equality with God a thing to be grasped,” but instead “humbled himself,” being “born in the likeness of men” and becoming “obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2: 5-7, *ESV*). According to the Christian faith, Jesus is the “sinless, divine, and self-avowed Lord” (manuscript, 1). He is also an exemplar of humility. However, in the *kenosis* and otherwise, it can seem wrong to think of his humility as consisting in his “owning” any limitations, defects, or mistakes. The NC account, by contrast, appears to offer a ready diagnosis of this case:

Paul here exhorts the Philippians to imitate Christ’s humility, and depicts Christ not as reckoning with his inferiority, his limits or his sins, but as being *unconcerned* in a certain specific way ... his humility consists in his being unconcerned in a certain way about his personal status, the prestige, honor, and position of power that he possesses as the divine Son. (2)

The foregoing is not a one-off instance of apparent humility-*sans*-limits-owning. Roberts also identifies two additional cases that exhibit a similar structure. The first is that of Frances Perkins, the first woman to hold a cabinet post in the US government. Early on in her career, Perkins learned that “in political life men take seriously women who remind them of their mothers.” This revelation compelled her to begin making adjustments to her personal appearance. Her biographer explains:

Perkins was then thirty-three, and perky, though certainly not beautiful. Up until then, she had dressed in the conventional fashion of the day. But from that point on she began dressing like a mother. She wore somber black dresses ... She suppressed her sexuality, her femininity, and even part of her identity in order to win the confidence of the old men around her. (7)

The second case is that of a “rising star young professor” who quits his job at “a prestigious university ... and returns to teach at his unprestigious undergraduate Christian college. His reason is that he wants to serve in Christian higher education” (2016: 187). The behavior of Perkins and the young professor evinces a kind of humility. But here as well it seems odd to explain this in terms of their “owning” of any limitations, weaknesses, or defects.

This is an important objection. Any plausible version of the LO account must account for it. To see how a defender of the LO account might do so, it is important to note, first, that despite what trouble these cases might pose for the LO account, limitations *do* figure prominently in each one. By emptying himself, “taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men,” the divine son of God takes on a host of limitations. By donning somber black dresses and making other changes to her appearance, Perkins self-imposes limitations on her “sexuality” and “femininity” with the hope of gaining “the confidence of the old men around her.” And by leaving his post at an elite institution, the young Christian professor willingly limits his own access to the kinds of epistemic resources, prestige, and influence that go along with an appointment at the top of the professional pecking order. A second noteworthy feature of these cases is that, with each one, it makes sense to say that the person “humbles” herself or himself, and indeed, that she or he does so precisely *by* taking on certain limitations.

Accordingly, one line of defense might be to expand the LO account such that it covers both how a person responds to her *present* intellectual limitations and how she responds to the prospect of adopting *new* intellectual limitations. More specifically, it might be held that intellectual humility consists of appropriately attending to and owning one’s existing intellectual limitations and, where appropriate, of also taking on new intellectual limitations (i.e. of *humbling oneself*, intellectually). While the first two cases above are not cases of intellectual humility, the

third can be understood as such. The idea would be that the young professor manifests intellectual humility by taking on a new appointment that brings with it several intellectual limitations, such as a loss of intellectual status, colleagues and students that are less intellectually stimulating, considerably less time for research, and so on.¹⁰ Put slightly differently, a defender of the LO account might hold that intellectual humility consists of an appropriate awareness and “owning” of one’s actual *and prospective* intellectual limitations, where the latter involves taking on new limitations or “humbling oneself” in the suggested way.

Given the difference between “humbling oneself” and other ways of manifesting humility, an alternative defense of the LO account might involve distinguishing between intellectual humility proper and a kind of *supra*-intellectual humility. The idea would be that intellectual humility *proper* is (roughly) a matter of responding appropriately to intellectual limitations one already has; however, given that a person can also manifest intellectual humility by going *beyond* this standard and taking on *new* intellectual limitations, there also exists a kind of “supra-intellectual humility.”¹¹ *Supra*-intellectual humility, then, would be a virtuous disposition to identify and adopt new intellectual limitations out of a concern with epistemic goods. As the case of the young professor illustrates, the goods in question might pertain, not just to one’s own epistemic well-being, but also to the epistemic well-being of others (e.g. to Christian undergraduates’ understanding of how the life of the mind can be integrated with the life of faith). On the present view, the *kenosis* of Christ would be an illustration of *supra*-humility rather than humility *simpliciter*.

I will not attempt to adjudicate between these way of dealing with the objection. Each has its strengths and limitations. The important thing to note is that either one would preserve the gist of the LO account while also allowing it to accommodate the cases in question.

4. Objections to the “No Concern” Account

Having examined and responded to a pair of objections to the LO account of intellectual humility, I turn in the present section to raise some objections to the NC account. Recall that on this view, intellectual humility is a *negative* virtue: it is (primarily) a matter of *not* having a range of concerns characteristic of intellectual pride. If a person is not intellectually prideful, it follows (provided that she also has the required epistemic motivation) that she is intellectually humble. Accordingly, it is important to look closely at how Roberts conceives of intellectual pride and to ask whether this state *excludes* the full range of behaviors and attitudes inconsistent with intellectual humility.

As noted above, Roberts conceives of intellectual pride as consisting of more than a dozen individual “vices of intellectual pride” (e.g. intellectual “vanity, pretentiousness, impertinence, arrogance, presumptuousness, domination, hyper-autonomy, refractoriness, invidious pride [with envy, its obverse twin], snobbery, haughtiness, self-righteousness, selfish ambition, grandiosity, and self-complacency”). On his view, these vices have characteristic concerns that dominate the psychology of the intellectually prideful person (e.g. a concern for intellectual status, prestige, honors, regard, glory, adulation, entitlements, privilege, superiority, domination, power, control, or credit). Finally, he claims that the vices of intellectual pride fall into four categories: vices of “regard” (e.g. intellectual vanity, pretentiousness, and grandiosity), vices of “privilege” (e.g. intellectual arrogance, impertinence, and presumptuousness), vices of “control” (e.g. intellectual domination, hyper-autonomy, and refractoriness), and vices of “superiority” (e.g. intellectual conceit, haughtiness, and invidious pride).

This is an expansive and robust characterization of intellectual pride. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether it successfully covers the full range of actions and attitudes incompatible

with intellectual humility. I turn now to consider a pair of cases, each of which is intended to highlight a way of being and acting that is inconsistent with intellectual humility but that does not clearly or easily figure into Roberts's characterization of intellectual pride. For each case, I'll consider how Roberts might develop or expand his account to accommodate it. I will then turn to a deeper problem with his account.

4.1. Intellectual Humility and the Vices of Pride

Habitual *defensiveness* is a characteristically *unhumble* way of being. However, it is not clear where, if at all, a disposition of this sort would figure in Roberts's account of intellectual pride. For instance, intellectual defensiveness need not indicate a distorted concern for privilege, regard, control, or superiority, which correspond to Roberts's four categories of vices of intellectual pride. This opens up the possibility that someone like the following might count as intellectually humble on Roberts's view:

DEFENSIVE: A professional philosopher has deep epistemic interests that guide and animate her vibrant and accomplished intellectual life. She doesn't think of herself as brighter or more accomplished than she is or as meriting any special treatment or privileges on account of her intellectual achievements. Nor does she have any special concern for the kind of intellectual status, honors, or influence such achievements might bring (any tendency she has to care about such things is "muted" by her philosophical curiosity). Nevertheless, the professor is habitually defensive when presented with objections to her beliefs. When a view of hers comes under criticism, she has a difficult time listening, leaps to unwarranted conclusions, and feels compelled to have the last word. She stubbornly refuses to admit her intellectual mistakes.

The professor's inability to take criticism and stubborn refusal to admit error seem like sure signs of a deficiency of intellectual humility. However, by hypothesis, she has a deep concern with epistemic goods. Moreover, she is *unconcerned* with intellectual status, influence, control, and the like. And she does not regard herself as superior to her intellectual peers or as deserving of special intellectual treatment. Therefore, she would appear to count as intellectually humble on Roberts's view.

Roberts might try to resist this conclusion in either of a couple of ways. First, he might deny that the professor really has a serious concern with epistemic goods. He might say that if she did, she would know better than to be so intellectually defensive and stubborn. Indeed, in connection with a similar kind of case, Roberts comments that it is “a well-known principle that if you want to know and understand things, you’d better address your mistakes and be grateful to those who point them out to you” (manuscript, 10).¹² Thus he might argue that a genuine concern with epistemic goods would preclude the kind of intellectual defensiveness exemplified in this case.

This is not a very promising reply. First, a genuine and motivating interest in epistemic goods need not involve an interest in *all* truths. Thus the professor might be passionately interested in a wide range of philosophical (and many other) topics while being less interested in or less attentive to how some of her intellectual habits might get in the way of her inquiry into these topics. This underscores a second point: even if the professor were aware, at some level, of how her defensiveness impedes her pursuit of epistemic goods, this awareness might fail to be motivating. Instead, the professor might be consistently intellectually *akratic*: she might find herself responding defensively while being fully aware that doing so is detrimental to her epistemic well-being. There is, then, little reason to doubt that a genuine concern with epistemic goods is consistent with the professor’s defensiveness.

A different and more promising reply would be to clarify or broaden Roberts’s account of the vices of intellectual pride, such the defensive professor clearly instantiates one or more of these vices and therefore does not count as intellectually humble. Roberts might do this, first, by incorporating defensiveness into his account of one of the vices of intellectual pride already on his list (e.g. arrogance). Alternatively, he could add intellectual defensiveness or stubbornness to

his list of vices of pride. While requiring a revision to his account of intellectual pride, this reply would at least go some way toward rebutting the objection. Exactly how far it would go is a matter I will return to below.

I turn now to a second case, one that seems even further removed from Roberts's view of intellectual pride:

OVER-AMBITIOUS: During his first semester at university, an eager undergraduate enrolls in an upper-division philosophy course. He is immediately hooked. He marvels at how he has managed to get this far in his education knowing nothing about this fascinating discipline. He quickly endeavors to master its history, publish a paper in his department's undergraduate philosophy journal, and pursue admission to a top graduate program in philosophy. Alas, the undergraduate's philosophical ambitions far outstrip his promise, which is limited at best. He is overly quick to make bold philosophical conjectures and criticisms. He writes papers that are too long and complex given his questionable understanding of and facility with the material. Nor is the undergraduate's optimistic perspective on his own philosophical ability well supported by his evidence. On the contrary, the feedback he has received from his professors makes clear that he has a lot to learn about the "what and how" of doing philosophy. Nevertheless, his zeal for the subject is such that his ambitions go unchecked.

The student has failed to see the writing on the wall, at least about his short-term philosophical prospects. His unrestrained enthusiasm for philosophy has compelled him to bite off much more than he can or should attempt to chew. In light of this, one can easily imagine one of his professors gently conveying to him that he would do well to approach his studies with greater intellectual humility.¹³ The student's lack of intellectual humility is not the result of any ill-motivation on his part. He loves philosophy; and it is his passion for such that motivates his intellectual activity. The problem is that this passion is unchecked: it is not informed or guided by a proper sense of what is intellectually appropriate given his current knowledge, skills, and abilities. This seems like a sufficient basis for thinking that the student is deficient in intellectual humility.¹⁴

This case is even further removed from Roberts's characterization of intellectual pride.

The student does not appear to manifest any of the relevant vices; nor is he motivated by a concern with regard, privilege, control, or superiority (which again correspond to the four types of vices of pride on his view). Indeed, while insufficiently informed and regulated by reason, the student's motives are epistemically pure.

Roberts could respond to OVER-AMBITIOUS in a way that mirrors a reply to DEFENSIVENESS noted above, that is, by adding something like intellectual over-ambitiousness or overzealousness to his catalog of vices of intellectual pride. While this move might allow him to treat the student as deficient in intellectual humility (I say "might" for reasons that will become apparent in the following section), it would involve an even more significant retooling of his view. To see why, recall once more the four categories into which Roberts places the vices of intellectual pride: vices concerned with trying to acquire the *regard* or admiration of others; vices that follow from a distorted sense of *privilege* or entitlement; vices that involve trying to exercise *control* or influence over others; and vices that stem from an exaggerated sense of *superiority*. Two things are worth noting about this classification. First, the concerns and attitudes it describes clearly are prideful, and prideful in a way that is manifestly vicious. Second, there is a straightforward continuity between them. It is easy, for instance, to imagine a person with any one of the relevant concerns or attitudes (e.g. an exaggerated sense of superiority) exhibiting any of the others (e.g. an illicit sense of entitlement).

However, it is at best unclear whether these points apply to the intellectual defects manifested by the student in OVER-AMBITIOUS. First, while the student's mindset and behavior may be foolish or misguided, it is not clear that he should be considered *prideful*, especially if pride is to be understood in terms of the sorts of attitudes and concerns just noted. Second, there does not appear to be the same kind of psychological continuity between the

student's over-ambitiousness and these other concerns that there is between the concerns themselves. For example, while we might expect a person who thinks that he deserves the praise and admiration of others also to think that he is justified in treating them rudely or unjustly, nothing about the student's excessive intellectual zeal would seem to predict either of these or similar expressions of pride.

These differences complicate the proposed solution to the objection. If Roberts were to add something like intellectual over-ambition or overzealousness to his catalogue of vices of intellectual pride, he apparently would need to add an entirely new *category* of vices as well (for, again, the student's overzealousness seems not to fit into any of the existing four categories). Moreover, to avoid the appearance of arbitrariness, Roberts would need to give an account of the psychological continuity between the vices in this category and the vices in his other four categories. While this may be doable, it is not a simple solution to the objection.

Before moving on to a different criticism of Roberts's version of the NC account, I want to draw attention to the fact that both of the cases discussed in this section point in the direction of the LO account. The professor in DEFENSIVE is deficient in intellectual humility on account of her seeming inability to accept even well-founded criticisms of her view. Put another way, she habitually fails to "own" her intellectual mistakes. Similarly, the student in OVER-AMBITIOUS lacks intellectual humility because his intellectual activity, as well motivated as it is, is not guided or constrained by a proper awareness or acknowledgement of his intellectual limitations.

4.2. The Motivational Basis of Intellectual Pride

In the present section, I want to look more closely at Roberts's view of the motivational basis of intellectual pride. As noted above, he claims that qualities like intellectual arrogance and

defensiveness are vices of intellectual pride only if they are motivated by a “concern for self-importance,” that is, by an aspiration “to be a ‘big shot’ just for the sake of being important” (Roberts, manuscript, 4). Put another way, a trait is a vice of intellectual pride only if it is motivated by an *intrinsic* concern for things like status, superiority, privilege, and domination.

This claim has problematic implications. Per the cases discussed in the previous section, it allows for the possibility that, say, a person who is habitually defensive or overzealous in his intellectual pursuits might nevertheless be intellectually humble, as long as these qualities don’t arise from a “concern for self-importance” or an *intrinsic* desire for status, superiority, privilege, domination, or the like.¹⁵ In fact, a person could possess *all 15 or so of the traits associated with vices of intellectual pride*, that is, he could be intellectually pretentious, impertinent, arrogant, presumptuous, domineering, hyper-autonomous, and so on, yet not be deficient in intellectual humility, provided that he does not manifest a “concern for self-importance.”

Is it possible for a person to possess these traits *without* being motivated in this way? Indeed it is. The case of OVER-AMBITIOUS suggests that a person can fail to be intellectually humble without manifesting *any* concern with being a bigshot, let alone an *intrinsic* one. It shows that an enthusiastic pursuit of truth unchecked by a reasonable awareness of one’s limitations can be enough to prevent a person from being intellectually humble.¹⁶

What about intellectual defensiveness? Must this trait be motivated by a “concern for self-importance” in order to undermine a person’s claim to intellectual humility? Consider the case of DEFENSIVE. The professor’s habitual intellectual defensiveness certainly *could* be motivated by an intrinsic concern with status or domination; however, it need not be. Perhaps the professor has grown up in a defensive, argumentative family, where it is a matter of course that people react negatively to criticism. We can imagine that over time she has internalized this way

of responding to criticism such that it is now a familiar and entrenched feature of her intellectual character. The professor might still be deficient in intellectual humility, even though, *ex hypothesi*, she does not manifest a “concern for self-importance.” Alternatively, we can imagine that the professor is deeply insecure. When others criticize her views, she experiences this as an attack on her self-worth. In responding defensively to these criticisms, she is not pursuing self-importance, but rather is manifesting what is ultimately a natural and healthy desire to feel loved and accepted. The fact that her intellectual conduct and attitudes arise from a “natural and healthy” concern need not and should not prevent us from thinking of her as less than humble. Again, she *habitually* responds to well-founded criticisms of her views with irritation, defensiveness, and an unwillingness to listen.¹⁷ She is not intellectually humble. And yet, *contra* Roberts, she does not manifest an intrinsic concern with things like status, privilege, domination, or the like.

In a discussion of his (admittedly technical) notion of a “concern for self-importance,” Roberts distinguishes a *healthy* desire for personal importance from an unhealthy and vicious “concern for self-importance” (more on this distinction below). He says that the latter, but not the former, is an essential feature of intellectual pride. An upshot of the preceding discussion, one that seems like a rather commonplace feature of human experience, is that people who lack a healthy sense of personal importance can develop traits like intellectual arrogance and defensiveness (not to mention other vices of intellectual pride like intellectual vanity, domination, and pretentiousness) in a misguided attempt to achieve it. What motivates these traits need not be a concern with being a bigshot just for the sake of being a bigshot. Instead, it can be a legitimate but unmet desire to feel a basic sense of security, dignity, or worth. Again, while this motivational basis might mitigate how severely we criticize these persons or their

behavior, it does little to block the conclusion that they fall short of intellectual humility.

This is strong evidence for thinking that Roberts needs to widen his account of intellectual pride in yet another way. In addition to adding qualities like intellectual defensiveness and overzealousness to his catalogue of vices of intellectual pride, he also needs to broaden his conception of the potential motivational basis of these vices.

I conclude this section by noting a dilemma that Roberts faces in attempting to make the suggested modifications to his version of the LO account. On the one hand, by broadening his characterization of intellectual pride, he positions himself to make sense of the various failures of intellectual humility identified above. There is, however, a potential danger involved with so doing. To illustrate, note that people sometimes show concern for status, influence, and the like for reasons that do *not* warrant thinking of them as deficient in intellectual humility. A young professor, for instance, might give special attention to building up her reputation, publishing in the most prestigious journals, and acquiring a position of influence within the main professional organization in her field strictly because she has several children to support (Whitcomb *et al*, 8). This kind of preoccupation with status, prestige, and power does not, by itself, signal a deficiency of intellectual humility. The challenge for Roberts, then, is to broaden his account of intellectual pride so that it is neither too permissive (leaving him unable to accommodate the cases and considerations noted above) nor too lenient (such that persons like the young professor just described aren't deemed intellectually prideful).

5. Fostering Intellectual Humility

We have thus far been focusing on differences between the NC and LO accounts of intellectual humility. These differences notwithstanding, one thing should be clear: both accounts pick out a virtue worth having. Indeed, in an age of strident political rhetoric, information

proliferation, and growing epistemic insularity, the need for greater intellectual humility, as described by either account, is conspicuous and urgent (Baehr 2016, Chs. 1, 4, and 5). This urgency is even greater given a broadly Christian perspective on our predicament. The “neighbor-love” to which followers of Jesus are called (Mat. 22:39) extends to our *intellectual* engagement with people who view the world very differently than we do. Here, as in other contexts, Christ-like humility is called for. Given the current social and political climate, the stakes involved with manifesting (or failing to manifest) intellectual humility are exceedingly high.

This raises the question of whether and how the virtue of intellectual humility can be fostered, whether in ourselves or others. Can we as adults take steps to increase our own intellectual humility? Can we also take steps to help others—e.g. our children or students—develop this virtue? In the remainder of the chapter, I want to make a brief observation in response to the latter question.¹⁸ I will consider, in a necessarily cursory way, one aspect of what it might look like for parents or educators to try to foster intellectual humility in children or adolescents. My aim in doing so, again, is to underscore a point of commonality between the NC and LO accounts of this trait.

In a recent paper titled “Learning Intellectual Humility” (2016), Roberts identifies as an “important basis” of humility what psychologists Heinz Kohut and John Bowlby refer to, respectively, as “healthy narcissism” and “secure attachment”:

Through being given an appropriate amount of loving support and attention, along with age-appropriate neglect and autonomy, the child develops a self-security and self-confidence that enable him or her not to have inordinate need for attention, approval, and control, and thus to be free to value genuine goods for what they are worth and become self-forgetfully “absorbed” in them. This developmental achievement forestalls a crazily compulsive yearning for the false “goods” of the vices of pride: a hyper-concern for favorable attention, for competitive superiority, for extraordinary entitlements, for power and control over others, for membership in an elite class. And thus it frees ample space in

the child's heart for love of the intrinsic intellectual goods. (196-7)

Roberts's point here is reasonable and illuminating.¹⁹ We should expect a person with a secure ego or healthy attachments to find it much easier to be "unconcerned" with intellectual "attention, approval, and control," the apparent explanation being a natural human tendency, illustrated in connection with DEFENSIVE above, to turn *to* such concerns in order to make up or compensate for a *lack* of ego security or positive relational attachments.

I think the same point can be made about the psychological basis of intellectual humility as characterized by the LO account. Specifically, a person with a secure ego or strong relational attachments will be in a much better position to attend to and "own" her intellectual limitations than one who lacks these fundamental sources of security. Here as well the rationale is straightforward: for persons who lack a secure ego or strong attachments, admitting their cognitive limitations, weaknesses, or mistakes is likely to feel considerably more threatening and costly than it does for someone with a strong sense of self or with a strong relational base.²⁰ Without these fundamental psychological goods, a person is more likely to be ignorant of or anxious and defensive about her intellectual limitations. Accordingly, the LO account also favors thinking of something like a secure ego as a psychological basis of or precondition for intellectual humility.

The idea that intellectual humility depends on a secure ego or healthy relational attachments has important implications when it comes to thinking about steps that parents or educators might take to help young people grow in intellectual humility. Notably, these implications might remain hidden to the extent that one approaches the question of how to foster intellectual humility from a familiar Aristotelian perspective. For Aristotle, a person becomes virtuous largely by imitating the activity of virtuous exemplars. Accordingly, it falls to parents,

teachers, and others interested in helping children or adolescents grow in intellectual humility to model this virtue for them, to expose them to intellectually humble exemplars, and to provide them with ongoing opportunities to practice the actions characteristic of intellectual humility.

While this surely is one important part of what it might look like to try to nurture intellectual humility in parental or educational setting, the point we have just been considering suggests that if a child lacks a secure ego or strong relational attachments, such efforts are unlikely to have their intended effect. The exemplars to which the student is exposed may have little intuitive or affective appeal. The child may have trouble authentically entering into the practice of attending to or acknowledging her intellectual limitations. And so on.

It follows that the process of helping children and adolescents grow in intellectual humility is likely to be significantly enhanced by a kind of special attention to and regard for their underlying psychology, and specifically, for their fundamental ego stability or attachment base. This might, as Steve Porter argues in a recent paper on “intellectual therapy” (2016), make it incumbent on parents and teachers to pursue “reparative relational experiences” with the young people in their charge. Exactly what this might look like, especially within an educational context, is a topic for another occasion.²¹ At present, the point is that the kind of psychological factors and dynamics we have been considering underscore a robust *social* and *moral* dimension to fostering intellectual humility. The discussion suggests, among other things, that an educator’s moral character and sensibilities may be just as important as her intellectual character when it comes to helping her students grow in intellectual humility. This point holds equally for the LO and NC accounts of this virtue. Therefore, from a practical standpoint, or at least from the standpoint of what can be done to foster intellectual humility, the two accounts may not be very far apart.²²

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¹ These labels are taken mainly from (Roberts, manuscript).

² For an explicitly Christian account, see Walter Hilton's 14th century work *The Ladder of Perfection* (Bk. 1, Pt. 1, Ch. 15). It is worth noting that on the version of the LO account discussed here, intellectual humility does not involve an *overestimation* of one's limitations.

³ Roberts's formulation of the NC is something of a moving or evolving target. For instance, in recent paper (Roberts and West 2017), he introduces a *fifth* category of vices of pride, viz. "vices of tribal superiority" (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.). For the sake of simplicity, and because the vices in this category are less relevant to the present discussion, I exclude this category from the present characterization.

⁴ As Roberts himself nicely explains and illustrates (Roberts and Cleveland 2016, 11-18), this account adheres closely to traditionally dominant ways of thinking about humility proper. Something like this account of humility proper or intellectual humility also enjoys support among contemporary philosophers (e.g. Richards 1988 and Snow 1995) and psychologists (e.g. Tangney 2000 and Krumrei-Mancuso *et al* 2015).

⁵ This need not be the *exclusive* motivation. For more on this issue, see (Baehr 2011, Ch. 6).

⁶ <http://addictionrehabnow.com/own-your-addiction-first-step-to-recovery/>

⁷ It is not important that a familiar notion of "owning" rule out *all* the behaviors and attitudes characteristic of all the vices of pride. Our usage of "owning" is quasi-technical. Cf. Roberts's acknowledgement that his usage of the concept of "self-importance" is "contrived" (Roberts and West 2017, 102).

⁸ On some of the latter points, see (Kahneman 2011).

⁹ For broadly related discussions in epistemology and ethics, respectively, see (Morton 2013) and (Tiberius 2008).

¹⁰ This illustrates the breadth of the concept of "intellectual limitations" employed here. A person's "intellectual limitations" need not be features of her own intellect. Nor need they be describable independently of her environment or situation (rather, an intellectual limitation can be a function, or largely a function, of a person's intellectual environment).

¹¹ Aristotle makes a similar move at the beginning of Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when identifies "heroic" or "divine" virtue as a state that in some sense lies above and beyond ordinary virtue (and corresponds to "bestiality," which lies "below and beyond" ordinary vice).

¹² Roberts makes this point in response to a case that is similar to DEFENSIVE and that my co-authors and I raise in (Whitcomb *et al* 2015, 7-8). DEFENSIVE has been more carefully crafted to clarify aspects of our initial case that might have been unclear.

¹³ As Scott Cleveland has pointed out to me, this would, in fact, be a paradigm case of intellectual pride for someone like Aquinas, who conceives of humility at the moderation of improper ambition.

¹⁴ Denying that the student is intellectually humble need not involve ascribing an intellectual *vice* to him, at least given the plausible view that the absence of a virtue doesn't entail the possession of a vice. Whether Roberts's view can make sense of this possibility is not something that I will attempt to address here.

¹⁵ Whether the person *would* be intellectually humble depends on whether he possesses the positive epistemic motivation that Roberts says is essential to the possession of intellectual humility. This issue need not occupy us here.

¹⁶ Again, it doesn't follow that the person possesses an intellectual vice, at least given the plausible idea that the absence of a virtue doesn't entail the possession of a vice.

¹⁷ Here as well, while the motivation underlying her behavior might mitigate the extent to which we are willing to ascribe to her a corresponding intellectual *vice*, this is a separate point, and one that need not occupy us here.

¹⁸ For a helpful discussion of the former question, see Roberts's paper "Learning Intellectual Humility" (2016).

¹⁹ It is also supported by some psychological research on humility. For instance, Chancellor *et al* identify a "secure, accepting identity" as one of the "hallmarks of humility that have strong theoretical support" (2013, 819) and remark that "[h]aving humility means one has a calm, accepting self-concept that is not hypersensitive to ego threat" (823). See also Dwiwardani *et al* (2014, 83-87).

²⁰ This claim also enjoys some empirical support. For instance, a study by Dwiwardani *et al* found "initial support for the idea that humility is grounded in a sense of security that allows one to consider one's strengths and limitations in non-defensive ways" (2014, 87).

²¹ Porter makes some headway on this issue in (2016, 235-237).

²² I am grateful to Steve Porter, Bob Roberts, Scott Cleveland and to audiences at the University of Edinburgh, the Center for Christian Thought at Biola University, and Azusa Pacific University for helpful conversation and feedback on earlier versions of this paper. Work on this paper benefited from Peter Hill's grant project "Developing Humility in Leaders," funded by a general grant from the John Templeton Foundation.