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Defining Humility: The Scope of Humility

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HUMILITY AND STRENGTHS

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According to one familiar way of thinking about humility, it is comprised of a certain attitude or orientation toward one's limitations. Minimally, a humble person is aware of, rather than oblivious to or in denial about, her limitations. But such awareness is not sufficient for humility, for a person could be aware of but chronically irritated by or defensive about her limitations. As such, she would be less than humble. Accordingly, humility also involves accepting or "owning" one's limitations.¹

While the scope of humility evidently includes one's limitations and weaknesses, some have argued that it should be understood in broader terms. In particular, it is sometimes claimed that humility involves a fitting awareness and responsiveness, not just toward one's limitations and weaknesses, but also toward one's *abilities* and *strengths*. Jeanine Grenberg (2015), for example, contends that humility is comprised of a "meta-attitude" that includes a "proper perspective" on oneself as "dependent and corrupt" but also a "*capable and dignified* rational agent" (133; emphasis added). Similarly, Ian Church (2017) has recently defended a view of intellectual humility according to which it is marked by an "appropriate attention to and ownership of intellectual limitations *and intellectual strengths*" (7; emphasis added).²

Call the first view—according to which humility involves an orientation toward one's limitations and weaknesses—the "narrow view" of humility, and the second view—according to which it also involves an orientation toward one's strengths and abilities—the "wide view."

The wide view has some plausibility. This becomes apparent when considering certain familiar, but ultimately problematic, conceptions of humility. The following call to humility is from the 14th Century English mystic Walter Hilton:

[T]hou shalt deem and hold thyself more vile and more wretched than any one creature that liveth; insomuch that thou shalt hardly be able to brook and endure thyself, for the greatness and number of thy sins, and the filth which thou shalt feel in thyself....³

Such conceptions of humility have a long history in philosophical and theological writings about humility. However, for those who regard humility as a healthy and admirable trait, that is, as a genuine personal virtue, these views are objectionable. They suggest that the humble person

¹ For a recent defense of this view applied to *intellectual* humility, see Whitcomb *et al* (2015). For related treatments, see Snow (1995), Spiegel (2012), Taylor (1985). Thomas Aquinas also defends a view along these lines. He says, of the humble person, that "he must know his disproportion to that which surpasses his capacity. Hence knowledge of one's deficiency belongs to humility, as a rule guiding the appetite" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, a. 161, a. 2, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province).

² Hazlett's (2012) account of intellectual humility, while doxastically focused, also appears to be "wide" in the relevant sense. As does the account in Kallestrup and Pritchard (forthcoming).

³ *Ladder of Perfection*, Bk. 1, Pt. 1, Ch. 15.

necessarily has a *skewed* or *distorted* view of her moral status—that humility requires thinking of oneself as *worse* than one really is.

One natural response to such conceptions is to insist that the humble person has a proper appreciation, not just of her weaknesses and limitations, but also of her strengths and abilities. We will take a closer look at this reasoning toward the end of the chapter. In the meantime, my aim is to argue in support of the narrow view of humility. I do so, first, by raising two objections to the wide view. I then offer a pair of error theories aimed at explaining whatever initial appeal the wide view might enjoy. Finally, I consider and respond to several objections to the narrow view. My hope is that the discussion, in addition to laying bare the relative strengths and weaknesses of the wide and narrow views, will shed light on the overall structure of humility and its relationship to other morally significant qualities like servility, arrogance, and proper pride.

Two preliminary points are in order. First, the present chapter is not intended as a comprehensive defense of the narrow view of humility. Rather, it is intended merely as a defense of the narrow view over and against the wide view. Thus I will not be taking a stand on whether the scope of humility can or should be broadened in other respects—e.g. whether it should be broadened to incorporate, not just a certain self-focus, but also a certain focus or orientation toward others. That said, I will note in passing that the narrow view does not entail, or even make probable, that humble persons will be objectionably self-focused. On the contrary, being free to admit their limitations and failures, we should expect humble persons to look beyond themselves in ways that self-focused and self-involved persons tend not to.

Second, while admittedly a quasi-technical concern, the difference between the narrow and wide views of humility is not without consequence. To illustrate, suppose one is interested in developing a valid psychological measure of humility. When it comes to formulating or assessing potential scale items, it will make no small difference whether one is thinking of humility as demanding a certain attitude toward one's limitations and weaknesses only, or as also demanding a certain awareness or responsiveness to one's abilities and strengths. Alternatively, suppose one is attempting to cultivate humility in oneself or others (e.g. in one's children, students, or parishioners). Here as well it is likely to matter—in terms of the sorts of things one focuses on or the activities one undertakes—whether humility is conceived of in narrower or broader terms. These reasons for caring about the comparative merits of the narrow and wide views of humility are in addition to a purely theoretical reason. Humility, properly conceived, is a deep and admirable personal excellence. On this basis alone, a proper understanding of its essential or defining features is a worthwhile intellectual pursuit.

1. Problems with the Wide View

My first argument against the wide view centers around a principle that pertains generally to virtue-theoretic attempts to specify the defining character of a virtue:

If, when considering whether a given activity *A* is a defining feature of some particular virtue *V*, we find that *A* is already a defining feature of some *other* virtue *W* that is clearly *distinct* from *V*, we should resist identifying *A* as a defining feature of *V*.⁴

⁴ It is important that *V* and *W* be clearly distinct; otherwise, the principle could run aground in cases in which one virtue is a species of another. For instance, Nathan King (2014) argues convincingly that intellectual courage is a species of intellectual perseverance. If so, then without

Suppose, for instance, that someone defines curiosity, conceived of as an intellectual virtue, as a disposition to wonder, ask questions, and consider issues from multiple perspectives. This definition might elicit the following objection:

While curiosity does involve wondering and asking questions, the claim that it is *also* a matter of considering multiple perspectives packs too much into the concept. For, considering multiple perspectives is the work of a related but distinct intellectual virtue: viz. open-mindedness. While curious people might tend to be open-minded, we shouldn't run these two virtues together. Wondering and asking questions is the business of curiosity; considering multiple perspectives is the business of open-mindedness.

It is not uncommon for theoretical discussions of particular virtues to lose sight of this principle. One often finds attempts to specify the defining character of a given virtue *V* encroaching on other putative virtues that are distinct from, if closely related, to *V*.⁵

My contention is that the wide view does just this. For, the relevant orientation toward one's *strengths and abilities* is already the business of a virtue other than humility. Specifically, *proper pride* is widely regarded as involving a disposition to own one's strengths, abilities, achievements, and the like. To illustrate, suppose an extremely capable student with whom I am well-acquainted comes to me expressing doubt about her ability to do graduate-level work in philosophy. In response, I am likely to say something like:

While I understand your concern, you needn't be worried. You're more than prepared to excel in a graduate program. In fact, I think it's time for you to begin acknowledging and owning the remarkable abilities you've demonstrated throughout your undergraduate career. You ought to be *proud* of how capable you are and of how much you've accomplished.

It appears, then, that the wide view is guilty of trying to shoehorn an "ownership" of one's abilities and strengths into its conception of humility, thereby conflating humility with the distinct but no less important virtue of proper pride. I return to this mistake below.

A second argument against the wide view builds on the first. It is aimed at showing that the wide view has manifestly implausible implications when applied to particular cases. If the wide view is correct, then when my capable but diffident student communicates her self-doubt, it should make sense for me to respond by saying something like: "You're being too hard on yourself. You should try to be a little *more humble* and start owning your strengths." For, on the

the caveat in question, the principle would entail that if persisting in the face of danger is characteristic of intellectual courage, we should not treat it as characteristic of intellectual perseverance (which would be a mistake given that intellectual courage is a type of intellectual perseverance). By contrast with intellectual courage and perseverance, humility and proper pride seem clearly to be distinct (i.e. it is not intuitively plausible to think of humility, say, as a species or type of proper pride like it is to think of courage as a species or type of perseverance).

⁵ See, for example, the account of intellectual humility in Samuelson *et al* (2015), which pretty clearly ranges over a wide variety of intellectual virtues, including but not at all limited to intellectual humility.

wide view, strengths-owning is a quality a sufficient amount of which is necessary for “hitting the mean” or possessing the virtue of humility. My student clearly does not possess a sufficient amount of this quality: she fails to see or appreciate her strengths. It follows from the wide view that she needs to become more humble.⁶

But this seems like exactly the wrong diagnosis. There would not appear to be any aspect of humility with respect to the student is deficient (in the relevant quantitative sense). Rather, her shortcoming is that she is excessively humble. The narrow view makes perfect sense of this. The student is ascribing limitations or weaknesses to herself that she does not possess. Therefore, on the narrow view, she is being *servile*, not humble.

To get a better sense of the problem, note that on the wide view, humility exists along two primary dimensions: limitations-owning and strengths-owning. A virtuously humble person is said to hit the mean between excess and deficiency along *both* of these dimensions. My student, while excessive in limitations-owning, is deficient in strengths-owning (she has considerable philosophical strengths, which she doesn’t appreciate). Therefore, according to the wide view, she needs to become more humble along one of the two main dimensions of humility. But, again, from an intuitive standpoint, there does not appear to be any sense in which her humility needs to increase. It is excessive, period. What she needs is proper pride.

Another way to come at this point is to compare the following two people, who exhibit opposite limitations and strengths:

Person A has an accurate view of and owns her *limitations*; but she struggles to see or appreciate her *strengths*.

Person B has an accurate view of and owns her *strengths*; but she struggles to see and own her limitations.

If the wide view is right, then (*ceteris paribus*) person A and person B will be *equally* (if both imperfectly) humble. Person A hits the mean along the limitations-owning (but not the strengths-owning) dimension of humility, whereas Person B hits the mean along the strengths-owning (but not the limitations-owning) dimension. However, from an intuitive standpoint, these persons are *not* equally humble. Surely person A, who has an accurate view of and owns her limitations, exhibits greater humility than person B, who consistently fails to see and own her limitations.

In a recent defense of the wide view of intellectual humility, Church (2017) responds to something like this objection by arguing that the wide view does *not* entail that persons like my unconfident student need to become more humble. He comments:

[J]ust as we say that the servile person lacks intellectual humility only insofar as they have *too much* of it, we can say the same thing about the person who under-attends to and under-owns their intellectual strengths: that in under-attending to and under-owning their intellectual strengths, they lack humility, but only insofar as they have too much of it and have missed the virtuous mark of the mean. (7; emphasis added)

This line of response raises several questions: Can a defender of the wide view really maintain that persons like my unconfident student are *too humble* (vs. not humble enough)? If so, how?

⁶ For a similar case and point, see Whitcomb et al (2015: 21).

Furthermore, supposing the wide view can explain the sense in which such persons are too humble, can it really escape the conclusion that they *also* are not humble enough?

In response to the first question, I think an affirmative answer is in order, albeit not without qualification. If my student is entirely inattentive to and agnostic about her strengths, that is, if she is not ascribing limitations to herself where in fact she should be recognizing strengths, then it is unclear on what grounds a defender of the wide view might deem her “too humble.” However, if she is (erroneously) ascribing limitations to herself, then there is a clear sense in which she is “too humble,” even according to the wide view. Notably, this is a function of the *overlap* between the wide view and the narrow view. The wide view agrees with the narrow view that humility is at least partly a function of appropriate limitations-owning. Accordingly, because the person in question is ascribing limitations to herself that she doesn’t actually have, it follows from the wide view that she is excessively humble.

The more important question is whether this is all that follows from the wide view. Church’s response suggests that it is. He makes clear that on his view, the proponents of the wide view need not think of persons like the unconfident student as insufficiently humble. However, as indicated above, if the wide view is true, then strengths-owning is a positive, defining feature of humility, a feature of which the humble person must have “enough but not too much.” The problem is that the person in question does not have enough of this quality. Again, she needs more humility along the strengths-owning dimension of this virtue. If so, then while, with respect to the limitations-owning dimension of humility, she is “too humble,” it remains, with respect to the strengths-owning dimension, that she is “not humble enough.” I conclude that the wide view cannot escape the counterintuitive implication.

2. Explaining (Away) the Appeal of the Wide View

We have considered a pair of arguments in support of the narrow view over and against the wide view. The second of these arguments seems especially telling against the wide view. What, then, has attracted proponents of the wide view? How to explain its appeal?

At the outset of the paper, we noted that the wide view holds out a solution to accounts of humility that skew negative, portraying humility as involving an *overemphasis* on or *exaggeration* of one’s weaknesses or limitations. Again, such conceptions are not uncommon. They can lead to an acceptance of the wide view in the following way. One natural way of excluding the relevant distortion is to insist that humility requires an *accurate* (vs. a disparaging) view of oneself. In fact, in the philosophical, psychological, and theological literature on humility, accurate self-assessment is often identified as one of its central features, and apparently for this reason. June Tangney, for instance, identifies as a “key element” of humility an “accurate assessment of one’s abilities and achievements (*not* low self-esteem, self-deprecation)” (2000: 497; emphasis in original).

Accordingly, someone might see fit to argue in the following way:

Humility involves accurate self-assessment. A person’s “self” includes her limitations and weaknesses *but also her abilities and strengths*. Therefore, humility involves an accurate assessment of one’s abilities and strengths.⁷

⁷ This is a more precise rendering of the kind of reasoning mentioned at the outset of the paper. That reasoning moved directly from the skewed picture of humility to a picture that incorporates

This way of thinking about humility averts the problems faced by objectionably negative construals of humility. However, it also inherits all of the problems with the wide view identified above. Therefore, prior to accepting this view, we should consider whether there might be a *different* way of building an accuracy requirement into an account of humility, a requirement that would make humility *inconsistent* with self-denigration and the like, but without requiring an accurate assessment of abilities and strengths.

The narrow view, suitably formulated, does precisely this. In its most general form, it identifies humility with an “appropriate” awareness of and responsiveness to one’s limitations and weaknesses. One natural way of fleshing out what it is for such an awareness to be “appropriate” is in terms of *accuracy*.⁸ Indeed, according to one prominent conception, humility centrally involves having an accurate view of one’s limitations. Nancy Snow, for instance, says the following:

Humility can be defined as the disposition to allow the awareness of and concern about your limitations to have a realistic influence on your attitudes and behavior. At the heart of this realism is a perspective gained through *accurate appraisal* of your limitations and their implications for your circumstances, attitudes, and behavior. (1995: 210; emphasis added)

Similarly, Norvin Richards (1988) identifies humility with “having an *accurate* sense of oneself, sufficiently firm to resist pressure toward incorrect revisions,” adding that “here the pressures are to think too *much* of oneself, rather than too little” (254; emphasis added). In other words, the humble person has an accurate view of herself in the sense that she doesn’t think too highly of herself—she is aware of and acknowledges her limitations and flaws.

My claim, then, is that the wide view represents a kind of overcorrection vis-à-vis objectionably negative accounts of humility. In an attempt to avoid thinking of humility in servile or self-abasing terms, one might be led to conclude that humility requires having an accurate view of one’s limitations *and strengths*. We have seen, however, that the inclusion of strengths within the accurate perspective proper to humility is at once problematic and unnecessary. The narrow view, by contrast, threads the needle between the problems that beset the wide view, on the one hand, and an overly negative characterization of humility, on the other.

A second error theory begins with a familiar fact about character virtues: namely, that they often *complement* or *balance* each other out. Courage is balanced by caution. Justice is tempered by mercy. Open-mindedness is constrained by intellectual perseverance. Some philosophers have held the even stronger view that complementary virtues are “unified” in the sense that it is impossible to possess one without possessing the other. Note, however, that both of these views are entirely consistent with the possibility that complementary or unified virtues are conceptually distinct from each other. They do not support defining one such virtue in terms

strengths; it did not invoke the notion of accuracy. The present line of reasoning, I take it, has greater initial plausibility.

⁸ I do not here intend to distinguish between an *accurate* perspective and a perspective that is highly *reasonable* or *well-supported* by one’s evidence but ultimately mistaken. The present point is intended to be neutral with respect to this distinction.

of the characteristic features of another (e.g. defining courage in terms of caution, or vice versa). Indeed, doing so would erase any meaningful distinction between the virtues in question.⁹

My suggestion is that a failure to appreciate this point can make the wide view seem more plausible than it is. The idea that humility is (at least partly) constituted by appropriate limitations-owning is highly plausible. So is the idea that proper pride is (at least partly) constituted by appropriate strengths-owning. It is also reasonable to think that appropriate limitations-owning is bound up with appropriate strengths-owning, such that: if a person is good at assessing and owning her strengths, she will (at least) be less likely to attribute to herself weaknesses that she doesn't really possess; and if she reliably owns her weaknesses and limitations, she will (at least) be more likely to make a proper estimation of her strengths.

In light of this, it can be tempting to reason as follows:

To be a virtue, humility needs to be accompanied by proper pride. Proper pride involves appropriate strengths-owning. Therefore, humility is partly a matter of appropriate strengths owning.

But, again, such reasoning is invalid. While humility and proper pride complement and fortify each other, it does not follow that one should be defined in terms of the other, that is, that humility should be defined (even partly) in terms of appropriate strengths-owning. Indeed, to the extent that it is plausible to think of humility and proper pride as distinct traits, we should be wary of this inclusion.

3. Objections to the Narrow View

We have considered several reasons for embracing the narrow view of humility over the wide view. We have also sought to “explain away” at least some of the initial motivation for the wide view. How might a proponent of the wide view respond to our argument? One objection to the narrow view is as follows:

Overestimating or exaggerating one's strengths or abilities can indicate of a *lack* of humility. Therefore, humility itself must range, not merely over limitations and weaknesses, but also over strengths and abilities. And, therefore, the narrow view must be mistaken.

I agree with the main premise of this argument but deny that it poses a problem for the narrow view. How, then, is the fact that a person can fail to be humble on account of overestimating or exaggerating her strengths and abilities consistent with the narrow view? The answer is straightforward: when a person overestimates or exaggerates her abilities, she thereby fails to acknowledge certain of her *limitations*, namely, the limitations of her abilities.

Limitations pervade our existence. We are limited morally, intellectually, physically, metaphysically, spiritually, and otherwise. Even our strengths and abilities are limited. Humility,

⁹ The idea that “complementary” virtues are *not* distinct is consistent with an extreme (and less than popular) version of the unity thesis that traces back to Socrates in the *Protagoras*, according to which terms like wisdom, justice, and courage pick out a “single thing.” See Vlastos (1972) for a discussion.

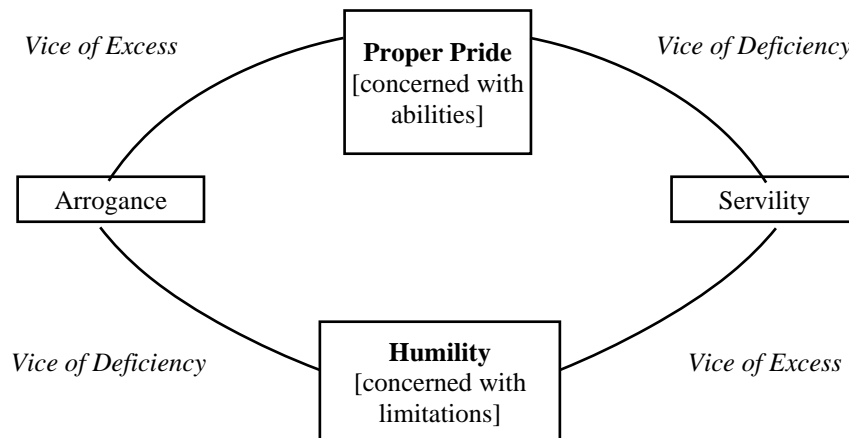
according to the narrow view, is the virtue that equips us to be properly attentive to and accepting of our limitations. As such, it involves noting and “owning” even the limitations of our abilities. The humble athlete, for instance, while perhaps recognizing her extraordinary ability on the field, also recognizes that her physical or athletic dominance does not entail her *moral* superiority, and so does not view herself as better or more important than her peers or fans from a moral standpoint. There is, then, a limited respect in which, according to the narrow view, the scope of humility extends to our abilities: it extends to our abilities *as limited*. Although an overestimation of abilities can indicate a failure of humility, this does not lend any special support to the wide view.

A similar argument against the narrow view might go as follows:

Arrogance is a deficiency of humility. Exaggerating one’s abilities can *as such* (not merely *qua* failure of limitations-owning) be an expression of arrogance. Therefore, contra the narrow view, humility *as such* requires not exaggerating one’s abilities.¹⁰

Even if this argument were cogent, it would not quite support the wide view. The wide view stipulates that humility requires a positive awareness of one’s abilities. If successful, the present argument shows that not exaggerating one’s abilities is a requirement of humility. The problem is that one can avoid an exaggerated or inflated view of one’s abilities without having a positive awareness of them, for example, by simply *not paying attention to or forming beliefs about* one’s abilities.

There is another, deeper problem with the argument. Recall that while arrogance is a deficiency of humility, it is also an *excess of proper pride*. The following diagram illustrates the relationship between pride, humility, arrogance, and servility:



According to the diagram, and as described above, proper pride is concerned with an appropriate attentiveness to and ownership of one’s abilities and strengths, while humility is concerned with an appropriate attentiveness to and ownership of one’s limitations and weaknesses. While different in this way, pride and humility terminate in a common pair of vices: arrogance includes both an excess of proper pride and a deficiency of humility; and servility ranges over a deficiency of proper pride and an excess of humility. What the model makes clear is that to

¹⁰ I owe this argument to Nate King.

explain the fact that exaggerating one's abilities can *as such* be an expression of arrogance, we need not view exaggeration of one's abilities as manifesting a deficiency of humility, and therefore need not view humility as ranging over abilities as well as limitations. For, the fact that exaggerating one's abilities can manifest arrogance is explainable in terms of the claim that arrogance is (partly) an excess of proper pride.¹¹

A third argument against the narrow view is from Church (2017), who argues that this view "allows for cases where someone ... can be at once and within the same domain intellectually humble and 'intellectually servile'" (7). His reasoning is that, on the narrow view, a person could be appropriately aware of and responsive to her intellectual limitations while failing to "appropriately attend to and own their intellectual strengths enough," which in turn would make the person intellectually servile. Church claims that it is "deeply counterintuitive" to suggest that someone could be both servile and humble within the same domain (8).

By way of response, it is important, first, to be clear that even on the narrow view, certain forms of servility are incompatible with humility. For instance, if one is ascribing weaknesses to oneself in areas where one in fact is strong, then one would be *servile*, not humble, according to the narrow view. We can refer to servility of this sort as "strong servility." Strong servility is distinct from "weak servility," which consists (merely) of *not* being sufficiently aware or appreciative of one's strengths. We will return to this distinction momentarily.

While the narrow view of humility excludes the co-instantiation of humility and strong servility, it leaves open the possibility that a person might exhibit an appropriate awareness and responsiveness toward her limitations while failing to recognize or appreciate her strengths. That is, she might be humble with respect to her limitations while being (weakly) servile with respect to her strengths. However, this is hardly "deeply counterintuitive." Indeed, it may not be counterintuitive at all. Recall that humility is but one virtue among many. A merely or predominantly humble person might still be far from perfect. Therefore, it should not be surprising that such a person, while appropriately attuned to her limitations, might have a hard time appreciating her strengths. Nor does it seem counterintuitive or otherwise objectionable that, in having a hard time appreciating her strengths, she might *in a sense* or *with respect to certain of her qualities* be (weakly) servile. I conclude that the sense in which humility is compatible with servility on the narrow view does not pose a significant problem for the view.

We turn now to a fourth and final argument against the narrow view. On one venerable and reasonably intuitive way of thinking about humility, it is a matter of occupying one's proper place within the broader order of things. This way of thinking about humility has enjoyed special resonance within the Jewish-Christian theological and intellectual traditions, with God at the top of the order of things and human beings somewhere down below (albeit not as far below as other living creatures). Aquinas, for instance, describes humility as a matter of "keeping oneself within one's bounds."¹²

This conception of humility poses a problem for the narrow view *provided* that keeping oneself "within one's bounds" involves acknowledging that, say, while relative to certain points or locations within the broader order, one is limited or occupies a low position, relative to other points or locations, one is *capable* or occupies a *high* position (e.g. as humans, we are less

¹¹ This argument takes for granted that an action can manifest a particular vice V by manifesting only one dimension (rather than the whole) of V. This strikes me as an unproblematic assumption so I won't pause to defend it here.

¹² *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. IV, ch. IV, tr. Rickaby.

exalted than the angels, but greater than the lowly worm). For, on this conception, humility ranges over abilities as well as limitations.

It is doubtful, however, that many of the thinkers who have conceived of humility as a matter of occupying our “proper place” in the broader order of things have had in mind, not merely our tendency to think too much of ourselves, but also a tendency to think too little of ourselves. This is especially so within the Jewish-Christian tradition, where humanity’s struggle with pride and drive to usurp God’s position are front and center in the dominant theological narrative. On a more plausible interpretation of this conception, humility is a matter of “occupying one’s proper place in the broader order of things” in the sense that it involves not attempting to occupy a *higher* or *greater* place within this order than is fitting for one. In short, it is a matter of keeping an eye on and resisting the impulse to transcend one’s limitations. Indeed, when Aquinas describes humility as “keeping oneself within one’s bounds,” he immediately qualifies this statement by saying that the humble person does not reach out “to things above” (vs. remaining above things that are below).¹³

None of this is to deny, of course, that it is a good thing for humans to be mindful of their strengths and abilities. The mistake is thinking of such activity as definitive or expressive of humility, rather than of some related virtue like proper pride. In keeping with this, we can imagine a person, similar to the diffident student described above, who fails to occupy her place within the broader order of things by regularly *demoting* herself, that is, by thinking of herself as *more* limited and *less* capable than she really is. Again, if humility is partly a matter of attending to and owning one’s strengths, if strengths-owning is one “quantity” of which the possession of humility requires having “enough but not too much,” then it should make sense to say of this person: “She needs to become more humble; she need to own her strengths.” But here as well this seems like profoundly inapt advice. Instead we should say something like: “She is excessively humble. She ought to recognize, own, and be proud of her abilities.”

Nor is the problem merely with what it would be appropriate or inappropriate to *say* to such a person. Again, it seems wrong to think that this person is, in any interesting respect, deficient in humility. To be sure, she is servile, and so lacks proper or virtuous humility. This is very different from claiming that there is an aspect or ingredient of humility—a proper appreciation of one’s *strengths*—that she lacks a sufficient quantity or amount of. But this, again, is precisely what the wide view of humility would have us say.

3. Conclusion

We have found that the wide view faces some formidable objections and that while it may have some initial appeal, this appeal does not arise from any distinct advantage of the wide view vis-à-vis the narrow view. This conclusion notwithstanding, I close by briefly revisiting the question of what humility, as depicted by the narrow view, demands in terms of an orientation toward one’s strengths and abilities. Two main points merit attention.

First, we have seen that there is a sense in which humility thus conceived can extend to a person’s abilities and strengths. Again, this is because our abilities and strengths themselves are *limited*. In fact, it is not implausible to think that limitations of our strengths are among the

¹³ Notably, keeping within one’s bounds can have a robustly *social* dimension: it can include, for instance, a recognition that one is not superior to or more important than others, that one’s freedom is limited by the rights and well-being of others, and so on.

limitations that it is easiest for us to lose sight of or ignore. If so, it is not surprising that a concern with strengths and abilities has found its way into theoretical models of humility. The mistake has been to conclude that humility is concerned with strengths and abilities *as such*.

Second, there is a further, subtler reason to think of humility as connected with a person's orientation toward her abilities and strengths. Many people have a hard time appreciating or "owning" their strengths. This is evident in their inability to accept or feel comfortable with praise for these strengths. What lies at the bottom of such resistance? My suggestion is that in a non-trivial number of cases, the persons in question are hung up on—they have not yet "owned" or come to terms with—one or more of their limitations. Their discomfort with or shame about their limitations, weaknesses, or mistakes prevent them from seeing or accepting praise for their strengths. To illustrate, consider a person who seems incapable of accepting compliments for his formidable skill and accomplishments in some domain D. While strong in D, this person might be hung up on ways in which his abilities or accomplishments in D are less than perfect. His preoccupation with these (perhaps quite minimal or trivial) limitations might prevent him from appreciating or owning his (formidable) strengths in D.¹⁴ Accordingly, a person who is *comfortable* with and can freely *acknowledge* his limitations will be free of a potential obstacle to attending to and owning his strengths and abilities. This is an additional reason to expect a positive correlation between humility, understood as a proper orientation toward one's limitations, and a proper awareness of and responsiveness to one's strengths.¹⁵

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¹⁴ No less plausibly, he might find it difficult to own his strengths in D on account of being preoccupied with or ashamed about his (perhaps significant) limitations in some *other* domain E.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Drew Collins and Andrew McAnnally-Lintz for incisive comments on an earlier draft of this paper (and on my reply to Roberts). Work on the paper benefited from the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation, Grant No. 60622, "Developing Humility in Leaders."

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