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## Virtue

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*This is a penultimate draft. For the final draft, please see the volume in which it is published.*

## **VIRTUE**

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Intellectual virtues are traits of personal character that aim at and facilitate the acquisition and transmission of knowledge and related epistemic goods. In a volume on the epistemology of theology, it is worth considering: Which intellectual virtues aim at and facilitate knowledge of God? Put another way: When it comes to theistic knowledge, which personal traits contribute to optimal epistemic functioning?

Many familiar intellectual virtues are relevant here. Without traits like attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage, one's epistemic perspective on the nature and existence of God is likely to be subpar. In this chapter, I argue that *moral* humility (as distinct from *intellectual* humility) is also an intellectual virtue with respect to theistic knowledge. I begin with some brief remarks about the nature of intellectual virtues. Next, I sketch a personal orientation that I refer to as "human pride." Against this backdrop, I then develop an account of moral humility, exploring in some detail how it functions as an intellectual virtue in the realm of "theistic inquiry" (by which I mean, roughly, an active and sustained attempt to get at the truth regarding the existence or nature of God). Finally, I consider and respond to an objection according to which, given certain other features of human psychology, moral humility may in fact be an intellectual *vice* in the relevant context.

### **I**

Why do traits like attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, and the like count as intellectual virtues? What exactly gives them this status? One plausible view held by many virtue epistemologists is that the traits in question are intellectual virtues because they are traits that we have good reason to think are helpful for reaching the truth (Montmarquet, 1993; Baehr, 2011). More precisely, they are traits that we have good reason to think are helpful for overcoming various *challenges* or *obstacles* to truth (Baehr, 2011: 17-22).

Sometimes, getting to the truth is a relatively straightforward affair. If I wish to know what sorts of medium-sized physical objects populate my immediate surroundings, I need only open my eyes and look. However, reaching the truth about other matters can be more demanding. This includes much of the knowledge prized by human beings, including scientific, mathematical, historical, and philosophical knowledge. In these domains, obstacles to truth abound. Overcoming these obstacles often requires an exercise of virtues like intellectual carefulness, intellectual thoroughness, intellectual rigor, and intellectual perseverance. A similar point applies to some self-knowledge, for instance, knowledge of one's cognitive limitations or failures. Such knowledge can require intellectual honesty, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, or intellectual integrity (for more on these points, see Baehr, 2011: Chs. 2-4).

This characterization of intellectual virtues underscores the possibility that, if there are peculiar challenges or obstacles to reaching the truth within a given domain, the list or

set of intellectual virtues proper to that domain might differ from the traits we ordinarily think of as intellectual virtues. My aim is to argue that precisely this point applies to the domain of theistic inquiry—that moral humility is an intellectual virtue in this context. As I explain in much greater detail below, this is attributable to the role that moral humility plays in mitigating the negative epistemic effects of a state I refer to “human pride.”

Many virtue epistemologists have identified *intellectual* humility as an intellectual virtue (Zagzebski 1996; Roberts and Wood 2007). As I intend to show, however, moral humility differs significantly from intellectual humility. It is a *habitual or practiced attentiveness to and responsible acknowledgement of one’s (broadly) moral limitations*. It is a matter of keeping these limitations in view and “owning” (rather than denying, hiding, or justifying) them in appropriate contexts. That moral humility should be an intellectual virtue is likely to seem puzzling, if not downright implausible. Moral humility does not, in any case, appear on any standard list of intellectual virtues. My aim is to make this initially puzzling claim seem plausible indeed.

## II

I begin by introducing an important background concept: namely, a personal stance or orientation that I shall refer to, quasi-technically, as “human pride” (HP). HP has four main elements: (1) self-righteousness; (2) self-sufficiency; (3) radical autonomy; and (4) epistemic invulnerability. I address each of these elements in turn.

The first element of HP is *self-righteousness*. The self-righteous individual is deeply attached to a view of herself according to which she is fundamentally a morally good or “good enough” person. While she may, from her own point of view, have certain flaws or imperfections, she is not in any deep or categorical way in need of forgiveness, mercy, or redemption. Consequently, the self-righteous person also tends to be highly sensitive about and resistant to negative judgments or criticisms of her moral character. When subjected to personal critique, she tends to be defensive and to rationalize the behavior or attitude in question. (For a similar depiction of “moral pride,” see Moser, 2008: 44, and Moser, 2010: 113. And for rich literary illustrations of this and the other three elements of HP, see the short stories and two novels of Flannery O’Connor, e.g. O’Connor 1946, 1949, and 1955, which were the primary inspiration for the account of theistic knowledge developed here.)

The second element of HP is an orientation of *self-sufficiency*. The self-sufficient person believes that he can “go it alone,” that he has within himself the strength and resources necessary for accomplishing what he needs or wants to in life. His success and well-being do not, from his point of view, depend on the assistance or resources of other persons—certainly not on those of any divine person or deity. He can get by on his own. He has the ability to work things out, to make it all okay (here as well see Moser, 2008: 43).

The third element of HP is a desire for *radical autonomy*. The radically autonomous person is her own practical authority. No one has the right to tell her what to do or how to live—how to spend her time, whom to associate with, or which ends to pursue. Her will and life are entirely her own. Consequently, the radically autonomous person is deeply recalcitrant to external authority and to any attempt to control or influence her behavior. She is “beholden to nothing and no one” (Plantinga, 2000: 211).

The fourth and final element of HP is a kind of *epistemic invulnerability*. It consists of a felt need to control the extent and terms on which one is known by others. The

epistemically invulnerable person tends to hide his true self. While he may, on occasion, offer glimpses of his genuine convictions or emotions, these glimpses come strictly on his own terms. He is the master of his own self-revelations. He is repelled by the thought that, unknown to him or in ways he has failed to authorize, others might gain epistemic access to his “inner self.”

The four elements of HP clearly are interrelated. For instance, a self-righteous person might be plagued by feelings of guilt and shame as she struggles to reconcile her unrealistically high view of her moral status with the corresponding reality. This in turn might lead her to hide her true self from others, that is, to pursue a state of epistemic invulnerability. Similarly, a person who regards himself as self-sufficient might thereby be susceptible to a desire for radical autonomy: if he can make it on his own, who are others to tell him what to do or how to live his life? While connected in these and other ways, no element of HP is reducible to any other. A person might be self-righteous, for instance, while still comfortably depending on others for various resources and support, that is, while not striving for a state self-sufficiency. Similarly, while self-sufficiency may contribute to a drive for radical autonomy, it need not do so: someone might be convinced that she has the resources to go it alone or to work things out on her own while freely recognizing that her attempts to do so are bound by a range of substantive moral constraints.

Taken together, these elements of HP paint a rather extreme psychological or characterological portrait. However, it clearly is possible to instantiate these elements to a greater or lesser extent and in combinations that are more or less extreme. Indeed, I take it that, in one form or another, HP is in fact a fairly familiar feature of human psychology: that we as human beings often tend toward things like insisting (beyond what is reasonable) on our own moral righteousness, trying to make it on our own instead of relying on the strength or resources of others, desiring freedom from external sources of authority that might oppose or thwart our wills, and seeking to control what others know or see of our real selves (for a similar account, see Plantinga, 2000: Ch. 7). This is, in any case, something that I shall take for granted in the remainder of the chapter. My claim, then, will be that *to the extent that HP characterizes human psychology*, moral humility is an intellectual virtue relative to theistic knowledge.

Finally, while HP is admittedly a quasi-technical notion, I take it that it also answers plausibly to ordinary ways of thinking about pride. We often think of pride (understood as a negative characteristic or vice) as involving an inflated view of oneself (self-righteousness) or one’s abilities (self-sufficiency), as well as an unjustified sense of entitlement vis-à-vis other persons (radical autonomy). We also think of proud persons as concealing their limitations or other personal qualities from others (epistemic invulnerability). Moreover, while something like a desire for *control*, say, clearly is relevant to more than one element of HP, it fails to cover the complete range of such elements. Self-righteousness, for instance, seems much more central to our ordinary concept of pride, understood as a vice, than it does to ordinary ways of thinking about what it is to need or yearn for control.

### III

Suppose, then, that HP characterizes a significant dimension of human psychology. My aim in this section is to examine the consequences of this for our reliability within the domain of theistic inquiry.

We can do so, first, by noting the place of HP within the Christian conception of God and God's relationship to human beings. (The main elements of this conception extend to the Jewish theological tradition as well. However, given the primary focus of the present volume, together with the sources informing the present account of theistic knowledge, I will speak mainly of the "Christian" conception of the matters at hand.) According to this conception, God is a perfect being and thus is wholly loving, powerful, and knowledgeable. Further, God is not detached from or disinterested in humanity. On the contrary, God loves human beings and desires fellowship with them. Human beings, on the other hand, are broken, fallen, and finite creatures. Our deepest need and greatest good is to be reconciled to and restored by God. Participating in such redemption involves, among other things, a pursuit of divine fellowship through faith in God and obedience to God's expectations and standards.

Thus conceived God is nothing short of a *mortal threat* to HP. While this may appear obvious, some of the details are worth dwelling on. On the Christian model, God is perfectly good and holy. Human beings, while bearers of the divine image and loved by God, nevertheless are broken, morally impoverished, and in need of redemption. While there is, of course, a spectrum of Christian views about the exact nature and extent of human sinfulness, none would license an attitude of *self-righteousness* as described above.

The Christian model is also opposed to an attitude of *self-sufficiency*. According to this model, we are dependent and finite beings. We cannot, of our own accord, meet our deepest needs and achieve a state of deep flourishing. We lack the capacities and resources to do so. Rather, we need each other; and, more importantly, we need God. God and God alone is the source of ultimate strength and well-being. Given this way of thinking about the relation between God and humanity, the orientation of self-sufficiency described above appears arrogant, misguided, and futile. Conversely, if I am convinced that I can get by on my own resources and abilities, and if this conviction is a driving force in my life or a commitment that is central to my very identity, then the Christian idea of God is bound to appear, not merely false, but repugnant.

*Radical autonomy* fares no better on the Christian model. For, given this model, each of us emphatically is not his or her own practical authority. On the contrary, we are all of us beholden to the standards and will of an omnipotent external authority. For better or worse, "not my will be done, but yours" is the order of the day. While consistent with a significant sphere of personal freedom, Christian theology posits major constraints on human autonomy. Indeed, the New Testament calls for the very forfeiture of one's life: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mat. 16:24-25).

The model in question poses an equally devastating threat to an attitude of *epistemic invulnerability*. The fact that God is personal and omniscient need not lead us to believe that God is, at every moment, conscious of or attending to each of our thoughts, feelings, or actions. It does, however, mean that God has unfettered epistemic *access* to these things.

God knows who we are. We cannot elude or hide from God. Ultimate control over our self-revelations is a hopeless prospect.

This tension between HP and the Christian deity has not gone entirely unnoticed by philosophers of theistic or atheistic persuasions. Thomas Nagel, for instance, makes the following candid admission:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. (1997: 130)

What exactly does Nagel find objectionable? He describes himself as having a "cosmic authority problem," suggesting that his hostility to the very idea of God is rooted in something like a desire for radical autonomy. He also makes the further conjecture that "this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time" (131).

Paul Moser also identifies a deep tension between a characteristic human desire for radical autonomy and self-sufficiency, on the one hand, and the very concept of the Christian God, on the other: "We typically favor idols over a perfectly authoritative and loving God given our penchant for maintaining authority or lordship, over our lives. Our typical attitude is thus: I will live my life *my way*, to get *what* I want, *when* I want it" (2008: 104). He elaborates:

In idolatry, we aren't satisfied with being secondary, dependent co-creators who honor God as the only self-sufficient preeminent authority. We devalue God's perfect authority with something other than God. Typically we reassign, in effect, God's supreme authority to *ourselves*, thereby seeking to be ultimately *self-governing* and *self-defining*. This involves a kind of *self-assertion* that disregards the supreme authority of God. (102)

In a discussion of "pride, that aboriginal sin," Plantinga makes a similar observation:

And God himself, the source of my very being, can also be a threat. In my prideful desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency I can come to resent the presence of someone upon whom I depend for my every breath and by comparison with whom I am small potatoes indeed. I can therefore come to hate him too. I want to be autonomous, beholden to no one. Perhaps this is the deepest root of the condition of sin. (Plantinga 2000: 208).

Having seen that a Christian conception of God and God's relationship to humanity poses a severe threat to HP, I turn now to examine more closely the epistemic *implications* of this point. Specifically, how is an (even tacit) awareness of this threat likely to bear on the epistemic condition of persons whose psychology is marked in significant ways by HP?

The effect is likely to be substantial and deleterious. Given the extreme tension between the Christian theological model and HP, to the extent that my psychology is characterized by HP, I am likely to struggle with engaging in honest and open inquiry about God. While such inquiry may not be a psychological impossibility, there can be little

question that I will have a vested interest in avoiding evidence that tells in favor of God's existence. (Throughout the paper I employ a broad conception of evidence that includes a wide range of truth-indicators like experiences and rational intuitions; thus I do not equate "evidence" with "*propositional* evidence."). Indeed, I might feel compelled simply to avoid questions about the existence of God, to be dismissive of religious standpoints and assertions, to keep my distance (physically and psychologically) from more intelligent and thoughtful religious believers, and so on. Clearly, such activity would not bode well for the quality of my epistemic perspective on theistic matters.

This dynamic bears further consideration. There are, I suggest, at least two distinct ways in which HP is likely to have a deleterious effect on one's epistemic perspective vis-à-vis questions about the nature and existence of God (for a related discussion, see Baehr, 2011: Ch. 5). First, HP seems apt to promote the *mishandling* of evidence that is already in one's possession. For instance, my desire for ultimate authority or deep resistance to seeing myself as someone in need of redemption might lead me to distort or misrepresent evidence I have that would otherwise support or confirm certain theistic beliefs. It might cause me to miss important logical connections or to misjudge their strength. It might lead me to avoid reflecting on or to reflect only fleetingly on this evidence.

Second, HP is also likely to prevent one from *acquiring* some theistic evidence in the first place. Such evidence might be found in nature, books, other people, or elsewhere. Again, to the extent that my psychology is marked by HP and I have at least some sense of the tension between HP and the Christian deity, I might, as a general policy, simply avoid thinking about religious questions, spending time with religious believers whose faith might prove challenging, reading or listening to defenses of religious viewpoints, and so on. HP might also cause me to miss out on a more immediate type of theistic evidence, namely, *experiential* evidence of God's existence or nature. If the Christian God exists, it is reasonable to think that such evidence might exist as well. However, it also stands to reason that God would at least sometimes withhold this evidence from persons in the grip of HP. Analogously, if I know of another person that she desires to be left alone, is opposed to being known by others, and is likely to interact with me in a guarded or elusive manner, then, out of *respect* for this person's autonomy, I am likely to refrain from engaging or acquainting myself with her. As a result, this person may end up being oblivious to my very existence; and she surely will be in the dark as to my nature. Similarly, out of respect for human beings, God might very well adopt a *laissez-faire* relational policy vis-à-vis persons motivated by HP. And such a policy might have epistemically significant implications.

Both Plantinga and Moser make similar observations. For Plantinga, knowledge of God is mediated via the "sensus divinitatis," the proper functioning of which can be impeded by sin: "[T]he deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*, muffled as they already are, can easily be suppressed and impeded. That can happen in various ways: for example, by deliberately or semi-deliberately turning one's attention away from them" (2000: 215). For Moser, the primary form of theistic evidence is a call to divine fellowship manifested in conscience. Individual persons are free to attend and submit to this call or to suppress and ignore it. Moser describes a rationale for resisting this call as follows:

I may not *want* to yield on this front, because giving ground here would seem to challenge my very self-definition and everything else I have supposedly self-achieved and credited to myself. I would then be left with a serious cognitive-

volitional disconnect, because I would then *apprehend* correctly that I *should* yield to God's call but still remain *unwilling* to yield to God's call. My will would then be out of line with what I have apprehended correctly regarding God's authoritative will, namely, that it is authoritative for myself and other humans. In that case, I may very well try to sidestep the disconnect by denying that I have actually apprehended God's call. I would then purchase cognitive-volitional coherence at the price of denying what I have actually apprehended (Moser 2008: 77-78).

For both Plantinga and Moser, a conflict between a person's will and certain considerations telling in favor of God's existence or nature can lead the person to avoid or distort these considerations, thereby impeding the person's epistemic functioning.

On the picture developed thus far, to the extent that HP has a hold on a person's psychology, there is a significant likelihood (other things being equal) that this person's epistemic perspective on the existence and nature of the Christian God will be impaired. Her evidence base may be impoverished, she may be led to deal with theistic evidence irresponsibly, and her cognitive processes may in general tend toward unreliability.

#### IV

I turn now to consider an antidote to HP, that is, an alternative orientation that, were it sufficiently ingrained in a person's character or psychology, would likely mitigate many of the epistemically deleterious effects of HP noted above.

This antidote is moral humility (MH). Again, I am thinking of MH as *a habitual or practiced awareness and responsible acknowledgement of one's broadly practical limitations, weakness, and mistakes*.

Several remarks about this definition are in order. First, to say that MH involves a habitual or practiced "awareness" of certain limitations or deficiencies is to say that it involves keeping these limitations in view or "on one's radar" as one traverses the various situations or domains to which they are relevant. Such awareness need not be especially conscious or explicit. It certainly need not involve a constant attending to or focusing on one's limitations. Indeed, in certain cases, a humble person's *actions* (rather than anything going on in his mind) may be the primary indicator that the awareness exists at all.

Second, I describe the limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes in question as "broadly moral" in part to mark a distinction between MH and *intellectual* humility (for more on the distinction between moral virtues and intellectual virtues, see Baehr, 2011: Appendix). Intellectual humility involves an awareness and acknowledgement of one's *epistemic* limitations and weaknesses, for example, gaps in one's knowledge, incompetence at thinking or reasoning in certain ways, or a lack of adequate support for one or more of one's beliefs. As such, intellectual humility is distinct from MH. On the other hand, I do not wish to limit the scope of MH to *narrowly* moral limitations and weaknesses. Instead, I intend for it to include a reasonably broad range of practical limitations, for instance, limitations on one's ability to control the course of one's life or the actions of other persons. While thinking of MH in this way is important to MH's being an antidote to HP, I take it that it also fits well with ordinary ways of thinking about humility.

Third, a mere practiced awareness of one's broadly moral limitations or failures cannot by itself be sufficient for MH, for such awareness could lead to psychological activity



that is manifestly *uncharacteristic* of humility. For instance, if I am keenly aware of my moral limitations or failures, this might lead me to be extremely anxious or defensive about them. Or it might lead me to look down upon and criticize others as a way of trying to build myself up. For this reason, it is important to conceive of MH as also involving a *responsible acknowledgement* or “owning” of one’s moral or practical limitations and deficiencies. What exactly such acknowledgement looks like will vary from one situation to another. Where the limitation in question is, say, a moral vice, it might involve a willingness to admit to another person that one has this vice and to prevent it from guiding one’s actions. On the other hand, if the limitation concerns the fact that one does not have total control over one’s life or future, “owning” the limitation might look pausing to remind oneself of this fact and allowing this realization to inform one’s practical reasoning (i.e. it need not involve an attempt to *alter* or *eradicate* the limitation).

How exactly, and to what extent, is MH an *antidote* to HP? First, with very few (if any) exceptions, a person whose character is marked by MH is unlikely to be very *self-righteous*. I take it that I am not being too pessimistic about human nature to suggest that if we were genuinely aware of and willing to “own” the full extent of our broadly moral limitations, weakness, and mistakes—the various ways in which we fall short, the harm we cause to others, the limited resources we have to control our lives or to solve all of our own problems—this would significantly undercut whatever inclination we might have to think of ourselves as especially morally righteous.

Similarly, a morally humble person in our sense is unlikely to be inclined toward *self-sufficiency*. Here as well I assume that I am not underestimating the practical resources of human beings by asserting that those among us who have given up trying to avoid or deny—and rather have come to accept—their broadly moral limitations will not be prone to think or act as if they can “go it alone” in life, as if they can achieve a meaningful and satisfying existence entirely on their own, without any significant dependence on the resources or support of others. On the contrary, such persons are likely to recognize that, in many important spheres of life, they have little if any ultimate control. And they are likely to possess an appropriate willingness to rely on—perhaps even to seek out—the support and resources of others.

As should be evident, MH is a direct antidote to the self-righteousness and self-sufficiency elements of HP. However, it stands somewhat differently with respect to the radical autonomy and epistemic invulnerability elements.

To see how MH is related to *radical autonomy*, we can begin by considering how the latter is related to the two elements of HP just considered. If I think of myself as above moral reproach (self-righteousness) and as capable of getting by on my own (self-sufficiency), this might very well deepen my resistance to external authority. I might view myself as not needing any mercy, support, or guidance from others. Now recall the undercutting effect of MH on self-righteousness and self-sufficiency: if I am sensitive to my own broadly moral limitations and failures in the manner characteristic of MH, this is likely to have a significant mitigating effect on any tendency I have toward self-righteousness or self-sufficiency; indeed, it just is to acknowledge that I am not morally “good enough” and that I cannot get by entirely on my own strength and resources. This in turn seems likely to have a mitigating effect on any tendency I might have toward radical autonomy. Having repudiated self-righteousness and self-sufficiency, it stands to reason that I would be more likely to acknowledge—even to seek out—the guidance and authority of others.

A similar point can be made about the relation between MH and *epistemic invulnerability*. Recall that self-righteousness and self-sufficiency involve having some (arguably) badly mistaken beliefs about oneself (e.g. that one is morally righteous or that one can get by strictly on one's own resources). Provided that most of us are far from morally righteous or self-sufficient, it is not unreasonable to think that, to the extent that I am in the grip of a self-righteous and self-sufficient attitude, I will at least occasionally have a sense that the beliefs in question are false. That is, I will, on occasion, get the sense (however implicit or subconscious) that I *do* need the forgiveness and mercy of others or that I *cannot* make it entirely on my own. This in turn might lead to feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame as I experience the discrepancy between these competing impressions of myself. It is not difficult to imagine the further effect this is likely to have on my orientation toward others. Specifically, I am likely to resist being known by others for fear that they too might become aware of (thereby making even more salient to myself) my moral and practical shortcomings or failures. It seems likely, in other words, to lead to a state of epistemic invulnerability. Suppose, then, that over time I begin to grow in MH. It should now be clear how, as my self-righteousness and self-sufficiency become undone by my growing MH, this is also likely to have a substantial mitigating effect on my desire for epistemic invulnerability. Having come to terms with or "owned" my moral and practical limitations and failures, I will have fewer reasons to hide from others.

We have considered at some length the relation between MH and the core elements of HP. We have seen that MH is a powerful antidote to HP. This is not to say that it is a complete or perfect antidote. MH is not derived from or a mirror image of HP. Nevertheless, having examined the relationship between MH and HP, we are now in a position to appreciate the way in which MH is an intellectual virtue. This is a two-part story. The first part of the story concerns the ways that HP stands to interfere with and undermine proper epistemic functioning in the context of theistic inquiry. Several of these ways were detailed in the previous section. The second part of the story concerns the ways, just discussed, that MH mitigates HP, that is, the ways it serves to mute, diminish, or eliminate self-righteousness, self-sufficiency, radical autonomy, and epistemic invulnerability. It is, then, in this mitigating or corrective capacity that MH does its epistemic work and thus qualifies as an intellectual or epistemic virtue. My claim is not that MH is an intellectual virtue across the board or across an especially wide range of domains. It is, however, an intellectual virtue when it comes to questions about the truth of Christian theism or about the existence or nature of the Christian God.

Finally, I conclude this section by noting that MH is an intellectual virtue, not just for the faithful, but for *anyone* who is interested in getting to the truth about the Christian God and whose psychology is marked by HP. First, note that nothing about the foregoing argument presupposes the truth of the Christian model. The central claim has been that the very *idea* or *concept* of God (regardless of whether this idea corresponds to anything in reality) is hostile to the ambitions and values that constitute HP, such that, to the extent that one is in the grip of HP, one's reliability in the domain of theistic inquiry is likely to be compromised. Second, we have also observed that if the Christian God *were* to exist, it is likely that access to some evidence of God's existence would be reserved for those whose character or psychology is marked by MH. It follows that even agnostic inquirers and committed atheists should be able to recognize the potentially epistemically beneficial effects of MH vis-à-vis questions about the existence or nature of God. Provided that such

persons desire to reach the truth about these questions, they too should be concerned about the extent to which their character might be marked by HP.

## V

I turn now to consider an important objection. At a general level, the picture defended in the previous section is one according to which a relatively common feature of human psychology threatens to render us epistemically unreliable when it comes to theistic inquiry. Specifically, HP is likely to dispose us unfavorably to the truth of the Christian theological model, such that the quality of our evidence and cognitive functioning relative to this model will be significantly diminished.

However, it might reasonably be pointed out that there are *other* dimensions of human psychology that also threaten to render us unreliable vis-à-vis theistic questions—but in the other direction, as it were. The most salient such quality is a well-documented fear of death and corresponding desire for *transcendence* or *immortality* (Freud 1961; Becker, 1973). Christian theism, of course, holds out great hope in the face of this desire: it promises, among other things, “everlasting life.” Accordingly, the human desire for transcendence (DT) also seems likely to dispose us to the truth of the Christian model in a way that diminishes the quality of our thinking and reasoning about this model. However, it does so in a way *opposite* of HP. While we might think of HP as making us “too hard” on theistic matters or evidence, DT seems likely to make us “too soft.”

I do not wish to dispute that DT is a familiar and deeply rooted feature of human psychology; nor will I dispute that DT could have an impact on the quality of our cognitive functioning relative to theism that is at least roughly on par with that of HP. The important question, for our purposes, is what, if any, implications this has for the argument put forth above. How, if at all, does it bear on the case for thinking of MH as an intellectual virtue in the relevant sense?

One possible reply would be that, given these facts about DT, it follows that MH is *not* in fact an intellectual virtue relative to theistic belief—indeed that it may be an intellectual *vice*. The argument might go like this: DT disposes us to be (unwarrantedly) epistemically soft vis-à-vis theistic questions and evidence; MH is likely to magnify or compound such softness, thereby undermining our reliability vis-à-vis theistic belief; therefore, MH is not an intellectual virtue.

This argument is problematic. First, it is not at all clear that MH would compound the epistemic weakness introduced by DT. Other things being equal, MH seems likely to make a person more open to theistic belief. However, the content of MH is such that it may actually serve to *temper* DT. The morally humble person, in our sense, is attentive to and can comfortably “own” or acknowledge her broadly moral limits, which, as we have seen, include certain practical limits. It is not hard to imagine that part of what this might involve is an acceptance of one’s mortality. If this is right, then MH might serve to blunt DT in a way that would in fact have a net *positive* effect on one’s epistemic functioning relative to theistic belief. It might make one feel less acutely the “need” for immortality.

A second reply involves turning the objection on its head. We have noted that DT might have epistemically deleterious effects on our reliability vis-à-vis theistic questions and evidence. In the same way that we identified MH as an antidote to HP, we should think about which qualities or traits might mitigate the negative effects of DT. One obvious

candidate here is something like intellectual *caution*. An intellectually cautious person is slow to jump to conclusions; she is thoughtful and circumspect about factors that might be influencing her epistemic perspective or activity (for an extended discussion of intellectual caution, see Roberts and Wood, 2007: Ch. 8). Applied to DT and theistic belief, we would expect such a person to be aware, at least to some extent, of her attachment to any goods the reality of which might be entailed by theism, and to take steps to mitigate the influence of this perception on her own pursuit, assessment, and response to theistic evidence. If inclined to draw a conclusion favorable to theism, for instance, she would consider, seriously and honestly, whether this assessment might be driven less by the evidence and more by her desire that theism be true. And, if she found reason to be concerned, she would pull back, withhold judgment, and resume her inquiry.

Now return to the objection above that calls into question whether MH really is an intellectual virtue. The present point is that a structurally identical argument can be offered for thinking that intellectual caution is not an intellectual virtue. For, while DT may dispose us toward theistic belief in a way that is unwarrantedly favorable, we have seen that HP has a tendency to dispose us toward theistic belief in a way that is unwarrantedly *hostile* or *unfavorable*. Accordingly, it could be argued that intellectual caution serves to compound this effect, making its possessor even *less* reliable vis-à-vis theistic belief. But it would be wrongheaded to conclude that intellectual caution is not an intellectual virtue in the relevant context—that we ought not, say, to be cautious and circumspect in our handling of theistic evidence when we know that we have a strong (arational) desire favoring the truth of theism. Neither, then, should we refrain from thinking of MH as an intellectual virtue.

The foregoing discussion suggests that when it comes to approaching and handling theistic evidence, we should, to the extent that we are inclined toward HP and DT, seek to cultivate or practice both MH and intellectual caution. Is this somehow a problematic prescription? I see no reason to think so. I certainly have not argued that MH is the *only* intellectual virtue relative to theistic belief. Indeed, I began the chapter by noting that other, more standard intellectual virtues (e.g. open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, attentiveness, intellectual thoroughness) are also very important in this domain. Nor is MH anything like the contrary of intellectual caution. There is no inherent or principled tension between these two states. Rather, we can think of them as playing complementary roles within a person's epistemic economy. As we have seen, MH is useful for overcoming the obstacle that HP poses to optimal epistemic functioning in the relevant domain. We have also seen, however, that intellectual caution plays an important role vis-à-vis a different epistemic obstacle: namely, DT. Moreover, even in its mitigating role vis-à-vis HP, MH needs to be constrained by intellectual caution and many other virtues like intellectual thoroughness, carefulness, and honesty. MH is, then, one of a number of intellectual virtues relevant to theistic inquiry.

This gives rise to a final question. The point just made might lead one to wonder: is MH really an *essential* intellectual virtue when it comes to theistic inquiry? In the same way that a person who knows he is firmly in the grip of DT might, in the face of assessing a set of proposed reasons for thinking that God exists, step back and exercise a range of familiar intellectual virtues (e.g. intellectual caution, honesty, carefulness, thoroughness, etc.), why not simply say the same thing about a person who knows he is firmly in the grip of HP? In other words, why not think that an exercise of standard virtues would be enough?

I have several replies to this question. First, nothing about the question threatens the foregoing argument in support of thinking of MH as an intellectual virtue. For it does nothing to undermine the idea that MH is a broadly effective way of improving one's epistemic functioning relative to theistic belief. Second, the question is whether, in the face of HP, an exercise of standard intellectual virtues would generally be sufficient. But sufficient for what? For optimal epistemic functioning? This seems unlikely. I do not doubt that intellectual honesty, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, and the like might go some way toward combatting the negative epistemic effects of HP. They are, however, no substitute for MH. The role of MH described above is not merely reparative. The kind of freedom from HP provided by MH has the potential, not just to improve one's assessment of evidence that is already in one's possession, but also to provide one with access to further evidence that might otherwise be out of reach. I have a hard time imagining an exercise of standard intellectual virtues having this kind of effect. It makes greater sense to think of standard virtues as having the potential to improve the quality of epistemic functioning *within* the constraints or limitations posed by HP, but not to break down or transcend these constraints. (A related question is whether an exercise of standard virtues might, when combined with true belief and other constitutive elements, be sufficient for theistic or atheistic *knowledge*. While I cannot take up this question here, I think the answer depends both on how exactly one conceives of the nature of knowledge and the precise bearing of HP or DT in the particular case.) Third, we have seen that MH may yield access to a powerful and more immediate type of theistic evidence, namely, immediate evidence of God's presence, nature, intentions, and the like. Again, we saw that God might choose to manifest himself in a person's experience or consciousness on account of the person's MH. I see little reason to think that the same would be true for a person who is still substantially in the grip of HP but who is doing her best to combat its effects by exercising standard intellectual virtues.

## VI

By way of conclusion, let us consider a kind of practical application of the discussion in the previous section. Suppose a person, Jones, is preparing to engage in some form of intellectual activity (e.g. forming a belief, drawing an inference, reading a particular book or article, engaging in a conversation) aimed at getting at the truth about a particular theistic proposition (e.g. that God is real or that something like Judeo-Christian theism is true). The upshot of the preceding discussion is that Jones would do well at this point to step back and take stock of how certain aspects of his character or psychology might bear on his epistemic suitability for this task. One question he might do well to ask himself—or, perhaps better, to pose to others who know him well—is: What kind of hold does DT have on me? How might DT influence the intellectual activity I am preparing to engage in? To the extent that Jones has reason to think that his epistemic functioning in the present context could be impaired by DT, he would do well to take appropriate measures to keep DT in check—e.g. reasoning in ways that are particularly careful, cautious, and circumspect. However, we have seen that Jones would *also* do well to step back and ask himself or others who know him well: To what extent is my character or psychology marked by HP, that is, by self-righteousness, self-sufficiency, radical autonomy, or epistemic invulnerability? Here too, to the extent that he is given cause for concern, Jones would do well, not merely to try

to counteract the effects of HP by trying to be open-minded, fair-minded, intellectually honest, and the like, but also by pursuing greater MH. The latter might play a crucial role in improving the quality of Jones's intellectual activity. In this respect, MH can be seen to be an intellectual virtue on par with more familiar intellectual virtues.<sup>1</sup>

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