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# Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations

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## **Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations**

Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

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In the preface to *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick wonders why philosophical writings seem so arrogant:

...the usual manner of presenting philosophical work puzzles me. Works of philosophy are written as though their authors believe them to be the absolutely final word on their subject. But it's not, surely, that each philosopher thinks that he finally, thank God, has found the truth and built an impregnable fortress around it. We are all actually much more modest than that. For good reason. Having thought long and hard about the view he proposes, a philosopher has a reasonably good idea about its weak points; the places where great intellectual weight is placed upon something perhaps too fragile to bear it, the places where the unraveling of the view might begin, the unprobed assumptions he feels uneasy about.<sup>1</sup>

Although Nozick does not use these words, we might say that, by his lights, most philosophical writings display an astounding lack of intellectual humility.

In her widely-acclaimed book, *I Don't Know*, Leah Hager Cohen relates a conversation with her students about a "well-read" and "incredibly smart" colleague named "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 elaborates:

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 has a quite different response in such situations, says Cohen. “She says, ‘I don’t know that book.’ She says, ‘I’ve never heard of that person.’” We all know people like Mary in this respect, people who easily accept or expose their ignorance rather than deny or cover it up. This too looks like behavior characteristic of intellectual humility.<sup>2</sup>

But what is intellectual humility? What is it that Nozick suggests philosophical writings tend to display a lack of? What is it that Mary seems to exhibit in her behavior? We aim to answer these questions. Toward that end, we will (i) state and assess some current views about the nature of intellectual humility (*IH*, for short), (ii) propose and explain an alternative, (iii) give reasons for that alternative, (iv) address two objections to our proposal and show how our view solves a well-known puzzle about humility. Before we get down to work, four preliminary remarks are in order.

### **1. Preliminary remarks**

We can approach our first three remarks by way of June Tangney’s account of humility. She writes:

the key elements of humility seem to include: an accurate assessment of one’s abilities and achievements (not low self-esteem, self-deprecation), an ability to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often vis-à-vis a higher power); openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice; keeping one’s abilities and accomplishments—one’s place in the world—in perspective...; a relatively low self-focus, a “forgetting of the self,” while recognizing that one is but a part of the larger universe; an appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to the world.<sup>3</sup>

The items listed here are a diverse lot and, taken together, lack the sort of unity theorists typically seek to attain. Our first preliminary, then, is simply this: we will strive for more unity in our account of *IH* than this.

Second, the diversity of Tangney’s “key elements of humility” suggests that theorists should distinguish *IH* from two other things: (i) what we rightly expect to accompany or result from *IH*, and (ii) nearby but distinct virtues, e.g. open-mindedness.<sup>4</sup> We suspect that much of what Tangney and other theorists describe as constitutive of humility or *IH* is better seen as falling into one of these other two categories. (We could explain the diversity Tangney and others describe by saying that the concept of *IH* is polythetic, in which case we would not be tempted to theorize about what *IH* is. Instead, we will treat the concept of *IH* as monothetic, and explain the diversity by distinguishing what *IH* is from what tends to accompany or result from it.<sup>5</sup>)

Third, even if our first two remarks are correct, any more unified account of IH must contain the resources to explain why people tend to associate IH with these other things. This we will try to do.

Fourth, many moral views can be given either an “objective” or a “subjective” construal. To illustrate: while some act consequentialists say a person’s act is morally permissible because and only because it *has* no worse overall consequences than any alternative act available to the person, other act consequentialists say a person’s act is morally permissible because and only because it *seems to the person to have* no worse overall consequences than any alternative act available to the person. The former is “objective”; the latter is “subjective”. And while some theorists regard kindness as a disposition to help people *in need* (“objective”), others regard it as a disposition to help people who *seem to be in need* (“subjective”). We can likewise give “objective” or “subjective” construals of IH. We opt for an “objective” one, mainly for the sake of simplicity. Those who prefer something more “subjective” may easily modify what we say to suit their preferences.

## **2. Three accounts of IH**

Accounts of humility *per se* are more prevalent than accounts of IH. Still, since IH is humility as an intellectual character trait in a person, it can be inferred what accounts of humility *per se* might well say about IH. Although we will describe only three accounts, we will mention others in the literature as our discussion develops, although our focus is on contemporary secular accounts, not historical or religious ones.<sup>6</sup>

First, some theorists say that IH consists in proper belief. For example, Samuelson *et al* state that IH is “(roughly) believing as one ought, believing with the firmness the given belief merits”.<sup>7</sup> This strikes us as a non-starter. The disposition to believe as one ought is either the disposition to believe virtuously or the disposition to believe responsibly; but nothing as general as these dispositions is identical with anything as specific as IH. And the disposition to believe with the firmness a given belief merits is more aptly identified with the disposition to form epistemically justified beliefs than it is with anything as specific as IH. Like Samuelson *et al*, Allan Hazlett focuses on proper belief but, unlike them, his view is much more specific: “[IH] is a disposition not to adopt epistemically improper higher-order epistemic attitudes, and to adopt (in the right way, in the right situations) epistemically proper higher-order attitudes”.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the intellectually arrogant are disposed to “overestimate the epistemic status of their doxastic attitudes” and the intellectually servile are disposed to “underestimate the epistemic status of theirs”.

So on Hazlett's view, IH consists in a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic statuses of one's beliefs. Hazlett's view stays in the running.

Second, other writers say that humility consists in a low estimation of oneself. This is not surprising. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, humility consists in "having a lowly opinion of oneself". In the same vein, one theorist writes that "the man who accepts his lowly position as what is due him is the man who has humility, or the humble man".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, although Julia Driver distinguishes humility from modesty, she says that it is "closely akin to" it.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by that kinship, one might suggest that the humble person "is disposed to underestimate self-worth to some limited extent, in spite of the available evidence".<sup>11</sup> On this view, IH consists in a disposition to underestimate one's intellectual strengths and the like, contrary to the available evidence.

A third account draws on some reflections by Robert Roberts and Jay Wood. They tell us that "a perfectly rich account of humility" requires understanding how humility is "opposite to" fourteen vices: "arrogance, vanity, conceit, egotism, hyper-autonomy, grandiosity, pretentiousness, snobbishness, impertinence (presumption), haughtiness, self-righteousness, domination, selfish ambition, and self-complacency".<sup>12</sup> These vices, they say, "help to define humility"; "they are negatively definitive of it". They then give fourteen definitions, one for each vice listed above, two of which are these:

- "[v]anity is an excessive concern to be well regarded by other people, for the social importance their regard confers on oneself";
- "[a]rrogance is a disposition to 'infer' some illicit entitlement from a supposition of one's superiority, and to think, act, and feel on the basis of that claim".

According to Roberts and Wood, each of these vices has an intellectual variant whose "opposite" partly constitutes IH. They write:

What, then, is intellectual humility? The foregoing analysis suggests that [as the opposite of intellectual vanity,] it is an unusually low dispositional concern for the kind of self-importance that accrues to persons who are viewed by their intellectual communities as talented, accomplished, and skilled, especially where such concern is muted or sidelined by intrinsic intellectual concerns—in particular, the concern for knowledge with its various attributes of truth, justification, [etc.].... As the opposite of intellectual arrogance, humility is a disposition not to make unwarranted intellectual entitlement claims on the basis of

one's (supposed) superiority or excellence, out of a concern for self-exaltation, or some other vicious concern, or no vicious concern at all.<sup>13</sup>

While "a perfectly rich account" of IH would require completing this list with twelve further items, Roberts and Wood say that "a fair approximation of the virtue of humility can be achieved by looking primarily at two of its vice counterparts: vanity and arrogance," whose intellectual variants are featured in the quotation just above. In that case, we might consider a view according to which IH consists in a disposition to an unusually low concern for one's own intellectual status and entitlements.<sup>14</sup>

So we have three accounts of IH.

*Proper Beliefs.* IH consists in a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic statuses of one's beliefs.

*Underestimation of Strengths.* IH consists in a disposition to underestimate one's intellectual strengths, accomplishments, social status, and entitlements.

*Low Concern.* IH consists in a disposition to an unusually low concern for one's own intellectual status and entitlements.

By our lights, each of these accounts is problematic.

Beginning with Proper Beliefs, one can be disposed to form proper beliefs about the epistemic statuses of one's beliefs while failing to be intellectually humble, for at least two reasons. First, a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic status of one's beliefs need not constrain the ways in which one forms and maintains the latter beliefs. Thus, for example, one might be disposed to form proper beliefs about the epistemic statuses of her beliefs even though the latter beliefs are routinely formed and maintained due to an acute lack of awareness of her intellectual errors, vulnerabilities, deficits, and the like. Second, a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic status of one's beliefs need not constrain how one responds when that disposition is activated. Thus, for example, one might properly believe that his beliefs about current affairs are wholly unjustified and yet be strongly disposed to pretend to have knowledge, to make all sorts of proclamations about politics, economics, foreign policy, etc., to respond with hostility or defensiveness when questioned, to play obsessively the comparison game, to tear down others in order to feel better about oneself, and so on. A dispositional profile like this is incompatible with IH.

As for Underestimation of Strengths, a disposition to underestimate one's strengths, accomplishments, and the like, seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for IH. First, consider someone who is consistently motivated

to get epistemic goods and, as a result, is both aware of her intellectual limitations and disposed to respond appropriately to them, e.g. caring how they affect her beliefs and inquiries, admitting them to herself and others when appropriate, regretting them, doing something to change them if she can and when appropriate, etc. She strikes us as an exemplar of IH *even if* she also accurately estimates her intellectual strengths. Underestimation is not necessary. Second, imagine someone who is disposed to underestimate his strengths, and so on while also being clueless about his intellectual limitations, or being disposed to respond to them inappropriately, e.g. to not care about them, or to be hostile or defensive about criticism of them, etc. Underestimation is not sufficient.<sup>15</sup>

As for Low Concern, a disposition to an unusually low concern for one's own intellectual status and entitlements also seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for IH. First, it's not sufficient. Consider the case of Professor P, who is an extremely talented philosopher who knows he's extremely talented. He genuinely loves epistemic goods; indeed, his obsession with them drowns out any concern he might have otherwise had for status or entitlement. He simply doesn't care about impressing others, nor does he take himself to be entitled to special treatment or to disrespecting others. Status and entitlement aren't even on his radar. While extremely talented, Professor P is not perfect. When confronted with his intellectual imperfections or mistakes, his default response is to try to justify, cover up, or explain them away. He is notoriously bad at admitting when he has made a mistake or when one of his arguments is vulnerable to serious criticism. Professor P seems to be lacking in IH even though he is disposed to an unusually low concern for status and entitlement.<sup>16</sup> Second, it isn't necessary either. Consider again a person who is consistently motivated to get epistemic goods and, as a result, is aware of her intellectual limitations, and is disposed to respond appropriately to them in a variety of ways. Even so, she might not have a low concern for her own intellectual status and entitlements since she works in a male-dominated profession that marginalizes those without status, etc., and she knows that neither she nor the family that depends on her will flourish if she has a low concern for status, etc. We submit that she is not lacking in IH even though she is not disposed to have a low concern for status, etc.

Naturally, proponents of these three accounts will have something to say to our objections. We hope, however, that our objections suffice to motivate consideration of an alternative proposal, to which we now turn.

### 3. Proper attentiveness to, and owning, one's intellectual limitations

We begin with the big picture. On the one hand, there are one's strengths—the good things about oneself, e.g. one's skills and successes. On the other hand, there are one's limitations—the bad things about oneself, or the insufficiently good things, e.g. one's weaknesses and mistakes. Proper pride is having the right stance towards one's strengths; humility is having the right stance towards one's limitations. *Intellectual* humility, then, is having the right stance toward one's *intellectual* limitations.

Let's unpack this a bit. We're all familiar with what we gather under the rubric of "intellectual limitations": gaps in knowledge (e.g. ignorance of current affairs), cognitive mistakes (e.g. forgetting an appointment), unreliable processes (e.g. bad vision or memory), deficits in learnable skills (e.g. being bad at math), intellectual character flaws (e.g. a tendency to draw hasty inferences), and much more besides. But what is the right stance toward these limitations? In a nutshell, we submit that the right stance is to be appropriately attentive to them and to *own* them.

*Appropriate attentiveness.* On our view, humility partly consists in a disposition to be aware (even if just implicitly) of one's limitations, for them to come to mind when the occasion calls for it. In this connection, notice that the paradigmatically arrogant person is often oblivious to his limitations; they don't show up on his radar. The paradigmatically servile person, however, hardly sees anything else; his radar is perpetually peppered with his limitations. On our view, humility lies in the mean between these extremes. When life calls for one to be mindful of a limitation, then, and only then, will it appear on the ideally humble person's radar. And what goes for humility in general goes for IH in particular.

*Owning one's intellectual limitations.* Proper attentiveness is not enough for IH, however; the intellectually humble person will also *own* her intellectual limitations. We can begin to see what owning an intellectual limitation involves, and why it partly constitutes IH, by contrasting different ways in which one might respond to her awareness of such a limitation.

First, consider contrasting *cognitive* responses. Imagine someone who, when an intellectual limitation comes to mind, tends to ignore it or deny that she has it. She fails to believe, and accept, that she has the limitation, even though she has it. Or consider a department chair who's been promoted to Associate Dean, but who recognizes that he's terrible at calculating budgets. As things happen, he ends up over-spending drastically, but instead of attributing that outcome to his own tendency to miscalculate, he attributes it to his staff or blames "the recession". Contrast these people with their counterparts who, in the same contexts, tend to believe that they have those



limitations when they come to mind (perhaps even justifiedly), accept that they have them, and believe of the negative outcomes of their limitations that they are due to those limitations. In each pair of cases, the people in question are appropriately attentive to and aware of an intellectual limitation, but only the counterparts own it, thereby exhibiting IH. So, in owning her intellectual limitations, the person with IH is disposed to believe and accept that she has the limitations that she does, and to believe that the negative outcomes of her limitations are due to her limitations.

Now consider contrasting *behavioral* responses. Imagine someone who accepts that she is unreliable at judging age, but who would never admit it to anyone in any context; moreover, whenever questions of age come up in conversation, she pretends she is reliable, ignoring or discounting what others say, insisting she is right, and so on. Or imagine someone who acknowledges that his most cherished beliefs don't take into account all the relevant evidence, but who refrains from regulating his inferences accordingly. He draws inferences from those beliefs as if they were knowledge, he doesn't try to become more informed, and if he were to meet negative evidence, he would dismiss it without a fair hearing. Contrast these people with their counterparts who, in the same contexts, would tend to admit their limitations to others, avoid pretense, defer to others, draw inferences more hesitantly, seek more information, and consider counter-evidence judiciously. Again, in each pair of cases, people are appropriately attentive to and aware of an intellectual limitation, but only the counterparts own it, thereby manifesting IH. So, in owning her intellectual limitations, the person with IH is disposed to admit them to others, and more generally, to act as the context demands.

Next, consider contrasting *motivational* responses. Imagine a university sophomore getting bad grades who admits that he has certain intellectual limitations, and when his teachers and advisors point out some others, he admits that he has them too. However, he's unmoved by them. He doesn't care that he can't do math beyond simple arithmetic; he doesn't care that elementary logic evades him; he doesn't care that he can't construct an essay; and he doesn't care that he's ignorant across the curriculum. "Yes," he says to himself, "I concede those are weaknesses and that I have them, but it just doesn't matter." Contrast this student with his counterpart who, upon acknowledging his limitations and learning of more, is motivated to do something about them, who cares about them and wants to get rid of them if he can. Once again, in both cases, the student is appropriately attentive to and aware of his intellectual limitations, and even admits them, but only the counterpart owns them, and in doing so displays IH. So,

in owning his intellectual limitations, the person with IH is disposed to care about them and take them seriously, in accordance with what the context demands.

Lastly, consider contrasting *affective* responses. Imagine a prolific philosopher who knows his argumentation tends not to be as tight as it should be but, when this is repeatedly pointed out to him, he feels not the least bit embarrassed or disconcerted. Rather, he laughs it off as a cute quirk, like obsessively stroking your chin when you intently listen to someone. Or consider someone who is disposed to feel threatened or angry when her intellectual mistakes are brought to her attention, even supportively and with genuinely collaborative intentions. Contrast this pair with their counterparts, both of whom, in the same contexts, feel dismay or regret, while also feeling grateful to their colleagues for taking the time to point out the mistake. In both cases, the people in question are attentive to and aware of their intellectual weaknesses and errors, but only the counterparts own them, and in doing so express IH. So, in owning her intellectual limitations, the person with IH is disposed to regret, but not be hostile about, her limitations, and more generally, to affectively respond to her limitations as the context demands.

The upshot is that owning an intellectual limitation consists in a dispositional profile that includes cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and affective responses to an awareness of one's limitations.<sup>17</sup> Of course, we cannot do justice here to the rich variety of appropriate responses that fall into each of these categories. Nor can we spell out the ways in which one context might render one response appropriate while another context might render the same response inappropriate (e.g. when one is young and able, it might be appropriate to try to get rid of a limitation, but when one is old and feeble, a more appropriate response might be to come to peace with it). But, we can say that owning one's intellectual limitations *characteristically* involves dispositions to: (1) believe that one has them; and to believe that their negative outcomes are due to them; (2) to admit or acknowledge them; (3) to care about them and take them seriously; and (4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them. It is worth underscoring that nothing we have said about owning a limitation requires that one had, has, or ever will have control over whether one possesses it or how one responds to it. Whether one owns a limitation is wholly a matter of whether one has a certain dispositional profile, and whether one has that profile floats free of the debate over freedom, control, moral responsibility, determinism, and the like. We are acutely aware of the fact that there is much more to be said about owning a limitation. We hope, however, that we've said enough to indicate what we have in mind and why it might be useful to think of IH in terms of it.

One last word about the word “owning”. Despite its lack of ivory tower chic, it succinctly captures the rich, multi-track dispositional profile we have in mind. Moreover, our readers, or at least those of them who pay attention to contemporary popular culture, have a pretheoretic grip on the notion of owning – the sort of grip through which they “know what we mean” by the term. There are many recent popular uses of the term, in the sense in which we are using it. For example, in Season 2, Episode 7, of the TV show, *The Killing*, Detectives Linden and Holder are verbally fighting with each other. During the fight, Linden insults Holder about his drug abuse. Holder responds by saying, “Yeah, well at least I *own* my addiction”. Owing an addiction in the way advocated by twelve-step programs is a lot like owning an intellectual limitation.<sup>18</sup> Here’s another example. After his team’s loss to the San Antonio Spurs in Game 3 of the 2014 NBA finals, Miami Heat Coach Erik Spoelstra said, “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, move on”.<sup>19</sup> Such uses of the term “owning” indicate that the notion is in the air these days, and thus that it is a notion our readers are pre-theoretically familiar with. This pre-theoretic familiarity, along with the foregoing discussion of the dispositional profile with which we identify owning, renders owning an appropriate theoretical tool. Putting this tool to work, we can state our view of IH as follows:

*Limitations-Owning.* IH consists in proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one’s intellectual limitations.<sup>20</sup>

So much for what IH is. Why suppose it is ever a virtue? Arguably, for a character trait to be a virtue, the motivations that underlie it must make its possessor good as a person.<sup>21</sup> We won’t attempt to determine which motivations make one a *morally* good person, but we think that appropriately desiring epistemic goods such as truth, knowledge, and understanding makes one an intellectually good person, whether or not it makes one a morally good person.<sup>22</sup> So we propose that

IH is an intellectual virtue just when one is appropriately attentive to, and owns, one’s intellectual limitations *because* one is appropriately motivated to pursue epistemic goods, e.g. truth, knowledge, and understanding.

In contrast, consider a greedy manager, whose corporation values IH. In order to get the wealth and promotions for himself that he ultimately desires, he needs to get his employees to rate him highly on IH. So he cultivates the dispositions that constitute IH, and he succeeds. But in him IH is not an intellectual virtue since what motivates his caring about his limitations is a desire for wealth and rank and not epistemic goods.<sup>23</sup> Or consider a grade-driven student who has successfully cultivated the same dispositions but who is motivated solely by a desire

for good grades and the economic success they can bring. She too is intellectually humble; but she too lacks the intellectual virtue of IH. Although good grades and economic success are desirable, as are wealth and promotions, a desire for them does not make for intellectual virtue.

When IH is an intellectual virtue, it will be distinct from other intellectual virtues like open-mindedness (OM). As intellectual virtues, IH and OM will indeed share the motivation to pursue epistemic goods. But, their dispositional profiles will be distinct. Arguably, caring about one's intellectual limitations is the characteristic motivation of people with IH; whereas, caring about alternative perspectives is the characteristic motivation of people with OM. And, admitting intellectual limitations is the characteristic behavior of people with IH; whereas considering alternative perspectives is the characteristic behavior of people with OM. Though these dispositions may often occur together, they can come apart. One can have IH without OM and OM without IH.

Let's return to the question of what IH is. What can we say in favor of our proposed answer?

#### **4. In Favor of Limitations-Owning**

Two things. First, there are a number of plausible pre-theoretic predictions about IH, predictions whose plausibility needs to be explained, and Limitations-Owning explains their plausibility. (Note well: we do not say that these predictions are true. That would require verifying numerous claims, many of them more or less wholly empirical, about what is correlated with what. Although several empirical measures of IH are currently under development, as far as we know none experimentally verifies or falsifies those correlations.) Second, our account embraces what is right about alternative accounts while avoiding their problems.

##### **4.1 Limitations-Owning explains the plausibility of plausible predictions about IH**

So then, what can we plausibly predict of an intellectually humble person?

First, there are several predictions we might gather under the rubric of *predictions related to a variety of activities, motivations, and feelings*.

1. IH increases a person's propensity to admit his intellectual limitations to himself and others.

On Limitations-Owning, this prediction is plausible because IH involves owning one's limitations, and owning a limitation requires admitting that one has it and a tendency to admit it to others when called for.

**2.** IH reduces both a person's propensity to pretend to know something when he doesn't and his confidently answering a question whether or not he knows the answer (think: "male answer syndrome").

This prediction is likewise plausible on our view because IH involves higher than usual attentiveness to knowledge gaps; moreover, it requires owning those gaps, which involves a tendency to admit that one has those gaps, both to oneself and others. You'll hear "I don't know" a lot more from someone like that. (Recall Mary.)

**3.** IH reduces a person's propensity to blame and explain-away when confronting her own intellectual shortcomings.

According to Limitations-Owning, this prediction is plausible because owning one's limitations requires an appropriate cognitive response to recognition of one's limitations, and attributing negative outcomes of one's limitations to something else is not appropriate, and so blaming those outcomes on someone else or explaining them away is not appropriate.

**4.** IH decreases a person's propensity to set unattainable intellectual goals.

For instance, if an intellectually humble person knows that she is terrible at doing statistical analyses, she is less likely to single-handedly pursue a project that centers on statistical analysis.<sup>24</sup> This prediction is plausible on our view because owning one's limitations makes it more likely that one will recognize them and not be in denial about them—two factors the absence of which often causes one to bite off more than one can chew.

**5.** IH increases a person's propensity to defer to others who don't have her intellectual limitations, in situations that call upon those limitations.

On Limitations-Owning, those who are intellectually humble will own their limitations, and so respond appropriately to situations in which their intellectual limitations are called upon; deferring to the better-equipped will often be an appropriate response.

**6.** IH increases a person's concern about her own intellectual mistakes and weaknesses.

On the assumption that people who lack IH typically err on the side of deficiency, Limitations-Owning makes this prediction plausible because the intellectually humble person will be more likely to be attentive to his intellectual limitations and to care about their influence on his inquiries and decisions.

**7.** IH reduces feelings of anxiety and insecurity about one's own intellectual limitations.

On Limitations-Owning, this prediction is plausible because when one owns one's limitations, one is more likely to become reconciled with the fact that one has them, or at least one is more likely to "come clean" about possessing

them, which in many contexts will either eliminate or at least mitigate one source of anxiety or insecurity, namely failure to be reconciled with that fact or failure to “come clean”.

**8.** IH decreases a person’s propensity to excessively compare herself to others intellectually.

This prediction is plausible on our view because of the plausibility of the previous prediction. If anxiety and insecurity about one’s intellectual limitations are reduced, then one of the chief causes of excessive interpersonal intellectual comparisons will be reduced as well.

Second, there are several predictions we might gather under the rubric of *predictions related to cognitive biases*. We mention just one here, noting that there are scores of others. An interesting project would correlate IH with more of these biases, although, as we’ve already noted, experimental verification of any correlations must await a valid measure of IH.

**9.** IH reduces the intellectual aspect of the self-serving bias in a person, which is, very roughly, the propensity to attribute to oneself more responsibility for intellectual successes than for intellectual failures.<sup>25</sup>

Limitations-Owning makes sense of the plausibility of this prediction because ownership of one’s limitations requires a disposition to attribute the negative outcomes of one’s limitations to those limitations themselves, which belong to oneself and not something external to one.

A third rubric is *predictions related to belief-regulation*. For example:

**10.** IH increases a person’s propensity to revise a cherished belief or reduce confidence in it, when she learns of defeaters (i.e. reasons to think her belief is false or reasons to be suspicious of her grounds for it).

This prediction is plausible on our view because those who own their limitations due to a love of epistemic goods will be more inclined to recognize that a cherished belief may well result from limitations like overlooked defeaters, and so when they learn of a defeater, they’ll be more likely to revise the belief or reduce confidence in it. We’ll consider two other predictions related to belief-regulation in section 4.2.

A fourth rubric is *predictions related to other character traits and virtues*. We will illustrate with open-mindedness. For example:

**11.** IH increases a person’s propensity to consider alternative ideas, to listen to the views of others, and to spend more time trying to understand someone with whom he disagrees.

This prediction is plausible on Limitations-Owning because ownership of one's limitations requires caring about mitigating the negative effects of those limitations when one can, in which case one will be more likely to treat one's ideas and views, one's basis for them, and one's objections to alternatives as potentially in need of correction. Thus, one will be more likely to consider alternatives, to listen to them and to spend time trying to understand them.

**12.** IH increases a person's propensity to seek help from other sources about intellectual matters.

This prediction is plausible on our view because limitation-owners are more likely to recognize the fallibility of their beliefs and the limitations of their capacities and so, in so far as they are motivated to gain epistemic goods, they are more likely to seek the help of other sources in their pursuit of those goods.

We will have occasion in what follows to mention more plausible predictions about IH, and how our view explains their plausibility. For now, let's return to the three accounts of IH we discussed earlier.

#### **4.2 Limitations-Owning embraces what is right about other accounts while avoiding their problems**

It seems to us that Limitations-Owning embraces what's right about the three accounts of IH we discussed earlier while avoiding their problems.

We begin with accounts that focus on proper belief. Consider the following plausible prediction:

**13.** IH increases a person's propensity to hold a belief with the confidence that her evidence merits.

On our view, IH does not consist in a person's disposition to hold each belief with the confidence it merits, although that is Samuelson, *et al's* view. Even so, Limitations-Owning explains why it is plausible to expect the intellectually humble person to be so disposed. For if one is properly attentive to one's intellectual limitations—which, remember, includes intellectual errors of various sorts—one will be more likely to be aware of whether she accords her beliefs too much or too little confidence. And, if she does become aware of herself doing this, she will tend not to ignore or deny it but rather acknowledge it and try to correct for it if she can, or at least regulate its effects in her inquiries and decision-making. Now consider another plausible prediction about IH:

**14.** IH increases a person's propensity to have a clearer picture of what he knows and justifiedly believes and what he neither knows nor justifiedly believes.

On our view, IH does not consist in a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic statuses of one's beliefs, although that is Hazlett's view, which we labeled "Proper Beliefs" in section 2. But our view does explain why Hazlett's view has some plausibility. For, if one is properly attentive to, and owns, one's intellectual limitations, one

will be more sensitive to the ways in which one can go wrong in belief formation, and so be less likely to attribute knowledge or justified belief to oneself when one lacks them. The upshot is that our account embraces what is right about both of these variations on the proper belief theme.

Notice also that Limitations-Owning evades their problems. These variations on the proper belief theme allow one to be intellectually humble even when one's beliefs are routinely formed and maintained due to an acute lack of awareness or regulation of one's intellectual limitations; moreover, they allow one to be intellectually humble even when one's behavioral, motivational, and affective response to an awareness of one's intellectual limitations is systematically at odds with what we would expect from an intellectually humble person. Our view allows neither.

Now consider some more plausible predictions about IH.

**15.** IH reduces a person's propensity to expect or seek recognition and praise for her intellectual strengths and accomplishments.

**16.** IH reduces a person's propensity to treat intellectual inferiors with disrespect on the basis of his (supposed) intellectual superiority.

Unlike the view we labeled "Low Concern" in section 2, on our view, IH does not consist in an unusually low concern for one's own intellectual status and entitlements. If Low Concern were correct, it would render these predictions very plausible. But Limitations-Owning can explain their plausibility too. For if one is properly attentive to, and owns, one's intellectual limitations, then one will admit to oneself that one has the limitations that one is aware of, including the limitations of one's strengths, and one will be more apt to respond to that awareness appropriately, e.g. by expecting less in the way of recognition and praise for them, and by being more appreciative of the difficulties of intellectual endeavors and so more readily sympathetic with and respectful of intellectual inferiors. So our account embraces what is right about Low Concern.

It also evades the problems with that view. That's because, unlike our view, Low Concern allows one to be so obsessed with pursuing epistemic goods that one has no interest in the status or entitlements that might accrue to one's intellectual strengths, even though one is intellectually arrogant both by virtue of being excessively focused on those strengths and by virtue of being deficiently appreciative of one's intellectual weaknesses. (Remember Professor P.) Also, unlike Low Concern, our view allows one who rightly has an interest in her intellectual status and entitlements to be intellectually humble. (Remember the woman in the male-dominated profession.)



As for Underestimation of Strengths, we confess to finding it very difficult to embrace anything here. But at least we can say this much. Unlike Underestimation of Strengths, Limitations-Owning allows someone who is aware of her intellectual limitations, and who is disposed to respond appropriately to them, to be intellectually humble. Moreover, unlike Underestimation of Strengths, Limitations-Owning does not allow someone who is clueless about his intellectual limitations, or who is systematically disposed to respond to them inappropriately, to be intellectually humble.

## **5. Two problems and a puzzle**

We'd now turn to how Limitations-Owning can address two problems and a puzzle: the problem of self-focus, the problem of arrogance, and the puzzle of self-attribution. If it can adequately address these problems and puzzle, that's one more thing to say in its favor.

### **5.1 The problem of self-focus**

One way to get at the first problem is to note another plausible prediction about IH.

**17.** IH tends to decrease focus on oneself and to increase focus on others.

As it is sometimes put in the psychological literature, humility involves “a relatively low self-focus, a ‘forgetting of the self,’” a turn outward, away from self and toward others.<sup>26</sup> This platitude might be thought to constitute the basis for an objection to our account. Whereas Limitations-Owning identifies IH with a certain sort of self-focus—focusing on *one's own* intellectual limitations, being properly attentive to them and owning them—humility in general, and IH in particular, is not self-focused but others-focused, and so not self-focused in the way our view requires.

This is an important objection that we must examine carefully. Notice that, on the platitude in question, humility involves “a *relatively low* self-focus”; not no self-focus, but low self-focus. The phrase “a forgetting of the self” is hyperbole. Furthermore, notice that it is not low self-focus *per se* that is called for but *relatively* low self-focus. What does that mean? Low self-focus relative to the general run of humanity? No; the general run of humanity might be so excessively self-focused that having low self-focus relative to that much would still be too much for humility. Rather, we suggest, the humble person will have a relatively low self-focus in the sense that the extent to which she is self-focused is *unobjectionable*. Thus, our view is too self-focused and insufficiently others-

focused only if the self-focus and others-focus it calls for is objectionable. We submit that it is not objectionable, for four reasons.

First, the proper attentiveness to one's limitations that is partly constitutive of IH, on our view, is a mean between the extremes of ignoring and obsessing about one's limitations. On our view, an intellectually humble person will be aware of her limitations just when the situation calls for it. So, at the outset, *excessive* attentiveness to one's limitations is ruled out. The question, then, is whether, on our view, too much self-focus remains, and not enough others-focus is called for.

Our view of IH seems to call for enough others-focus since owning one's limitations involves tendencies to defer to others in situations that call upon one's intellectual limitations (prediction 5), to listen to what others say and to consider their ideas, even when one disagrees with them (prediction 11), and to seek help from others more generally in one's intellectual endeavors (prediction 12). That's the second point.

The third point is that, on our view, appropriate attentiveness to and owning of one's limitations is a matter of possessing a certain sort of dispositional profile, one that remains unconscious except when triggered in the appropriate circumstances. Conscious awareness of the self and its limitations is neither required nor typical of the intellectually humble person, on our view. Thus, most of the time, one can be appropriately attentive to, and own, one's limitations without consciously thinking about them, and so to that extent our view does not require self-focus.

Fourth, on our view, when limitation-owning is an intellectual virtue, it is motivated by the love of epistemic goods, which will largely focus an intellectually humble person on things outside of herself, as she navigates the world and attempts to increase her understanding of it. Of course, to the extent that her circumstances *properly* call for her to attend to her limitations, an intellectually humble person will do so, but she will do so largely for the sake of knowing and understanding things that have nothing to do with herself in particular.

We submit that the self-focus called for by our view is not too much and the others-focus is not too little. It is unobjectionable.

## **5.2 The problem of arrogance**

According to our view, IH consists in appropriate attentiveness to, and owning, one's intellectual limitations. It says nothing about one's orientation or stance toward one's intellectual strengths. Thus, it does not rule out the possibility of someone being intellectually humble and at the same time being excessively attentive to his strengths,

inordinately fond of them, and boastful about them, so much so that he is intellectually arrogant. So, our view allows for the possibility that someone can be at once intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant. But that doesn't seem possible. To put some flesh on the problem, imagine someone who constantly brags about how much smarter he is than everyone else, who is obsessed with comparing himself to other smart people, who feels intense pleasure when he reflects on his smarts and his accomplishments, and so on. On our view, it's possible for someone like that—and worse!—to be intellectually humble.<sup>27</sup>

*First solution.* We might turn to Jorge Garcia to solve this problem. According to him, humility consists in a “reasonable appreciation of the magnitude and significance of [one’s] failures, imperfections, flaws, weaknesses, dependency, and limitations,” as well as dispositions to appropriate behavioral, affective, and motivational responses in light of that appreciation.<sup>28</sup> But that’s not the whole story. In addition, he says, humility consists in “playing down” and being “unimpressed with” one’s talents, skills, virtues, achievements, possessions, ancestors, liberties, options, entitlements, privileges and so on for “other possible grounds of pride,” other “good features”.<sup>29</sup> Others also conceive of humility as involving the right stance toward one’s limitations and strengths.<sup>30</sup> So perhaps we simply need to expand our account of IH: IH consists in being properly attentive to, and owning, one’s limitations *and one’s strengths*. If we went that route, then our view would *not* allow for the possibility of someone being intellectually humble and at the same time being too attentive to his strengths, too fond of them, boastful about them, and so on; thus, it would rule out the possibility of someone being both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant.

What should we make of this solution to the problem of arrogance? We suggest that it is problematic, for two reasons.

First, if IH partly consists in appropriate attentiveness to and owning of one’s intellectual strengths, then the person who is insufficiently attentive to her strengths, who fails to appreciate them, and who under-estimates and under-emphasizes them will be a person who is not, you might say, *humble enough*. Imagine that a student of yours doesn’t say much in class because she thinks, incorrectly, that she has nothing to offer, that she doesn’t understand the material, and that her ideas are irrelevant. She also incorrectly attributes the success of her group-work to other students in the group, rather than to her own strengths. This student fails to be properly attentive to, and fails to own, her strengths. If IH partly consists in appropriate attentiveness to and owning of one’s intellectual strengths, this student, so to speak, *isn’t humble enough* and should be *more humble*. That seems to be the wrong result. Another way to put the point is this: with respect to the characteristics involved in the dispositions that are together

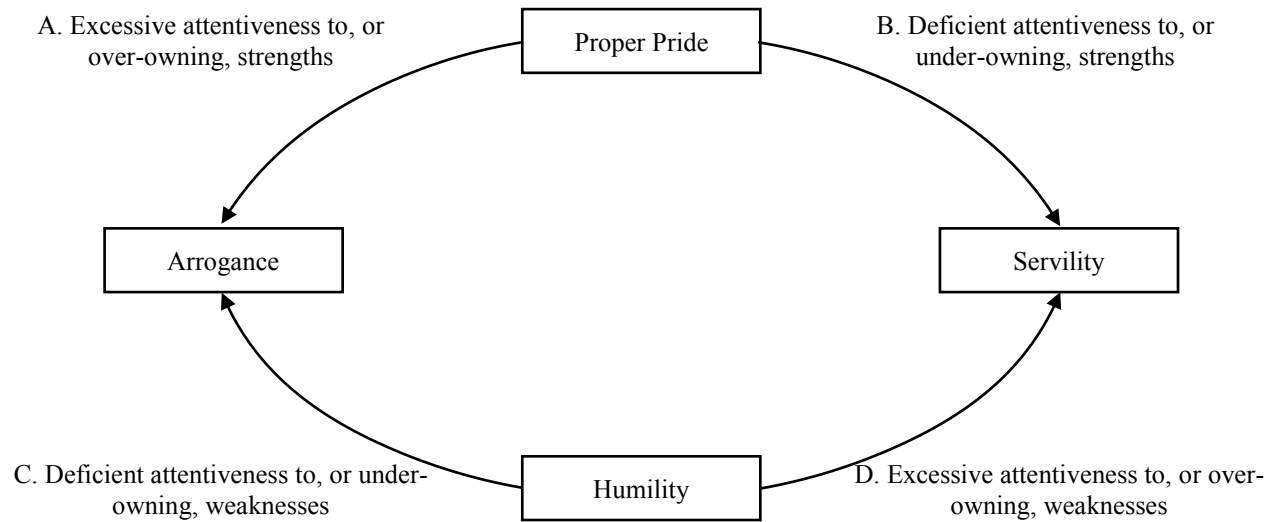
constitutive of proper attentiveness to, and owning, one's strengths, this student is *deficient*; and, by correcting that deficiency—by “playing up” her talents, skills, virtues, and so on, by being more impressed with them—she moves closer to being intellectually humble. Again, that seems to be the wrong verdict.

Secondly, as we indicated earlier, we think a different notion already picks out an appropriate attentiveness to and owning of one's intellectual strengths: namely, proper intellectual pride. We'll have more to say about it shortly. For now, we note that it is not identical to IH; nor would it appear to partly constitute IH. Thus we advocate a clean distinction between these traits, with proper intellectual pride pertaining to intellectual strengths and IH pertaining to intellectual weaknesses or limitations.

*Second solution.* The solution we currently favor appeals to what we will call *internal rationality*. We'll explain what we mean by that in a moment, but the intended upshot will be this. It is metaphysically impossible for a fully internally rational person to be at once intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant, but it is not only metaphysically possible for a less-than-fully rational person to be at once intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant, it is not surprising at all—it's just a result of the human condition. We will approach this conclusion in four steps: (i) we'll sketch more clearly how we are thinking of the relationship between four things: humility, proper pride, arrogance, and servility; (ii) we'll show how that picture cuts the problem of arrogance in half, so to speak; (iii) we'll say what we mean by internal rationality; and finally (iv) we'll explain how internal rationality might well eliminate the other half of the problem of arrogance as well.

(i) *A sketch: humility, proper-pride, arrogance, and servility.* Proper pride consists in being properly attentive to, and owning, one's strengths. As with proper attentiveness to one's limitations, proper attentiveness to one's strengths involves a disposition to be aware of one's strengths, for them to come to mind when the occasion calls for it. Proper pride lies in the mean between excessive and deficient attentiveness to one's strengths. Furthermore, as with owning limitations, owning strengths consists in a suite of behavioral, cognitive, motivational, affective, and perhaps other sorts of dispositions. This suite of dispositions is the appropriate stance or orientation toward our strengths. Thus, when life calls for the properly proud person to be attentive to one of her strengths, she will be aware of it; and, being aware of it, she will not ignore or deny it, but accept that she has it, and she will try to put it to work for the task at hand. She will also have an accurate sense of that strength as it is in her: she won't overestimate it or underestimate it, she'll accurately estimate it. If she's successful in its deployment, she will tend to

believe that her success was an outcome of that strength and not attribute it to someone or something else. She'll want to keep her strengths, to enhance them if she can; she will care about them. And when they come to mind, she'll tend to feel glad she has them, perhaps gratitude as well, and so on for other appropriate affective responses. To *own* a strength is to possess a suite of cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and affective dispositions like this.



***Diagram of the relationship between proper pride, humility, arrogance, and servility***

*Excessive* attentiveness to one's strengths, and a suite of dispositions we might call *over-owning one's strengths* (A in the diagram): *that* is arrogance. Over-owning one's strengths includes the dispositions to over-estimate one's strengths, to over-emphasize them, to over-attribute positive outcomes to them, to care too much about them, to be over-joyed by them, or to be otherwise disposed to inappropriately excessive responses to them.

*Deficient* attentiveness to one's strengths, and a suite of dispositions we might call *under-owning one's strengths* (B in the diagram): *that* is servility, diffidence, or self-deprecation. Under-owning one's strengths includes the dispositions to under-estimate them, to under-emphasize them, to under-attribute positive outcomes to them, to care too little about them, to be embarrassed by them, or to be otherwise disposed to inappropriately deficient responses to them.

Notice that, on this view, proper pride lies in the mean between arrogance and servility, but only in so far as one's orientation or stance toward one's strengths is concerned.

Humility, as we've already stated, consists in being properly attentive to, and owning, one's limitations.

*Excessive* attentiveness to one's limitations, and a suite of dispositions we might call *over-owning one's limitations* (C in the diagram): that too is servility, diffidence, or self-deprecation. Over-owning one's limitations includes the dispositions to over-emphasize them, to over-estimate them, to over-attribute negative outcomes to them, to care too much about them, to feel overwhelmed by them, or to otherwise have inappropriately excessive responses to one's limitations.

*Deficient* attentiveness to one's limitations, and a suite of dispositions we might call *under-owning one's limitations* (D in the diagram): that is arrogance as well. Under-owning one's limitations includes the dispositions to under-emphasize them, under-estimate them, to under-attribute negative outcomes to them, to care too little about them, to feel indifference to them, or to otherwise have inappropriately deficient responses to them.

Notice that, on this view, humility lies in the mean between arrogance and servility, but only in so far as one's orientation or stance toward one's limitations is concerned. Also, notice that, on this picture, there are two ways to be arrogant, first by being over-attentive to or over-owning one's strengths and, second, by being under-attentive to or under-owning one's limitations. And there are two ways to be servile, first by being over-attentive to or over-owning one's limitations and, second, by being under-attentive to or under-owning one's strengths.

(ii) *Cutting the problem in half.* On our view, intellectual arrogance (IA) spans or covers a person's responses both to her intellectual strengths and her intellectual limitations. IA covers both a person's over-owning her strengths and under-owning her limitations. Notice that, on our view, it is absolutely impossible for a person to both own her limitations and under-own her limitations. Thus, our view rules out one of the two ways in which a person can be both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant. You might say we've just cut the problem of arrogance in half. Now to the other half: on our view, it is possible for a person to own her intellectual limitations and so have IH and at the same time to over-own her intellectual strengths and so be intellectually arrogant. What do we have to say about that way of being both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant? Here's where internal rationality comes into the picture.

(iii) *Internal rationality.* The fully internally rational person is the person whose various mental states all cohere with one another. Her beliefs are logically consistent and closed under logical consequence (she believes the

logical consequences of whatever she believes). Moreover, her conative states, e.g. her desires, are jointly satisfiable and also closed under logical consequence.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, her affective states all cohere with each other, e.g. she does not at the same time literally hate the people she literally loves. In addition, her cognitive, conative, affective, and other states all harmonize with one another; for example, she does not believe that a person's action was wholly proper while at the same time resenting that action. Now to the last step in our attempt to solve the problem of arrogance.

(iv) *Internal rationality and the last half of the problem.* Imagine a person who is intellectually humble. Then she is appropriately attentive to, and owns, her intellectual limitations. Now add that she is fully internally rational in the specified sense. Then, since each limitation corresponds to a strength (and vice versa), the internal harmony of her mental states requires her to also be appropriately attentive to, and own, her intellectual strengths. Therefore, she will not be intellectually arrogant. To generalize, *for fully internally rationally people*, IH is incompatible with IA.

Let us illustrate. Each strength falls on a continuum. There is a memory continuum, for instance, measuring the degree to which people have good memories, i.e. capacities to retrieve information well. Now, suppose that a person has a fairly good but imperfect memory—her memory ranks in the top 5% of all people's memories. Consequently, one of this person's limitations is that her memory is *worse* than that of approximately 5% of all people, i.e. her capacities to retrieve information are worse than that of approximately 5% of all people. In that case, supposing she is intellectually humble, she is appropriately attentive to this limitation and also owns it. But the very existence of this limitation requires the existence of a corresponding strength as well: namely, that her memory is *better* than that of approximately 95% of all people. Given that she is appropriately attentive to and owns the limitation, *if she is fully internally rational*, she will also be properly attentive to and own the corresponding strength. That is to say: on pain of a drop in internal rationality, she must, *if she is* properly attentive to and owns the fact that her memory is worse than 5% of all other people's memories, *also be* properly attentive to and own the fact that her memory is better than 95% of people's memories. And, this latter attentiveness and ownership rules out IA with respect to her memory.

In short, on our account, IH *when combined with full internal rationality*, rules out IA. Fully internally rational people cannot be both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant.

But what about people who are not fully internally rational? All of us harbor various degrees of internal irrationality—such is the human condition. If someone is internally *irrational* in a suitable way, then it might well turn out that she owns her limitations but over-owns her strengths, in which case she will be both intellectually humble and intellectual arrogant. On reflection, perhaps this should not be all that surprising. When irrationality is on the scene—as it can be in the human mind—seemingly incompatible mental states can coexist.

We might sum up our proposed solution to the problem of arrogance like this. In one sense, it *is* impossible for a person to be both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant—it is *rationally* impossible. Nonetheless, in another sense, it is possible for a person to be both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant—it is *metaphysically* possible. Indeed, since the human mind allows for it, there is a sense in which it is not just metaphysically possible for a person to be both humble and arrogant, it is all too *humanly* possible.

Having shown how, on our view, humility relates to proper pride, we are in a better position to consider two more plausible predications about IH. First:

**18.** IH increases a person's propensity to accurately estimate her intellectual strengths.

Although on our view IH does not consist in accurately estimating one's strengths, it can explain the plausibility of this prediction. For if one is properly attentive to, and owns, one's intellectual limitations, then one is more likely to be aware of the limitations of one's strengths, which requires a more accurate assessment of those strengths themselves. Moreover, to the extent that we expect intellectually humble people to be internally rational, we will expect them to also own their strengths, in which case they will be more likely to accurately estimate them. Second:

**19.** IH decreases a person's propensity to be obsessed with his strengths and to boast about them.

On our view, this prediction is plausible because, once again, to the extent that we expect intellectually humble people to be internally rational, we will expect them to focus on their strengths just when the occasion calls for it, and so not be obsessed with them, and we will expect them to own their strengths, and so be less likely to boast about them. Moreover, in as much as, on our view, IH reduces feelings of anxiety and insecurity about one's own intellectual limitations, one source of excessive concern about one's strengths and boasting about them will be reduced.



### 5.3 The puzzle of self-attribution

Some writers have observed that there is something very strange about attributing humility to oneself, especially when one *is* humble. While it seems perfectly fine for those who are kind, open-minded, and respectful to sincerely assert that they are kind, open-minded, and respectful, it “seems to be oddly self-defeating,” as one theorist put it, or at least a severe jolt to our expectations, for those who are humble to sincerely assert “I am humble”.<sup>32</sup> It’s as if the humble person wipes out her humility just by the act of asserting it, or even by simply believing it.<sup>33</sup> How can we explain the strangeness—the self-defeatingness we sense, the hard jolt we feel—when the humble person attributes humility to herself? What is its source?

Well, that might well depend on what humility is. Consider views according to which humility at least partly consists in underestimating or downplaying one’s strengths, accomplishments, status, entitlements, and so on. If these views are correct, then, since humility is a strength and can be an accomplishment if it’s hard-earned, the humble person will *fail* to underestimate or downplay her strength or her accomplishment whenever she sincerely attributes humility to herself. You don’t underestimate or downplay your strengths when you go around asserting them. So, on this view, the explanation of the strangeness of the humble person asserting “I am humble” arguably resides in the fact that it’s absolutely impossible.

Our view does not afford such an elegant explanation. In fact, since on our view someone can be at once humble and arrogant, it doesn’t rule out the possibility of a humble person also being arrogant in virtue of overestimating and playing up her strengths, and consequently asserting that she is humble.

When faced with an apparent anomaly, you can try to explain it away, show it’s merely apparent and that there really isn’t anything puzzling or strange going on; alternatively, you can hold the puzzling, strange phenomenon fixed and try to explain its strangeness, its puzzling nature. We’ll do both.

*Reduce the strangeness.* There are contexts in which asserting that one is humble is not strange at all. For example, it does not seem strange to say “I am humble, but there isn’t much else positive to say about me”. Asserting your humility in the context of owning your limitations does not seem strange. Or imagine your therapist has successfully worked with you in an effort to help you come to grips with and regulate certain weaknesses you have. Toward the end of your weeks with him, he might encourage you to focus more on your strengths, and so he might ask you to say what they are, in which case saying that you are humble seems no more strange than saying that you are generous, respectful, and so on. Or suppose you are applying for a competitive job

opening, and one of the stated conditions is that the applicant will have an accurate sense of her weaknesses and be able to respond to them appropriately. In that context, to assert one's humility and to give evidence of it seems no less strange than to assert one's organizational skills and to give evidence of them. So even asserting your humility in the context of emphasizing your strengths doesn't always seem strange.<sup>34</sup> To its credit, our view explains why, in these sorts of cases, self-attributions of humility are not so strange.<sup>35</sup>

*Explain the strangeness.* Suppose we are unimpressed by the points just made, or that even after taking them into account, we think there's a residual strangeness that needs explaining. At least in some contexts, we might insist, when a humble person asserts "I am humble," there's something amiss, whether we think of it as a sort of self-defeatingness in the assertion, or a jolt to our expectations. Can our view of humility explain that strangeness? Maybe.

First, on our view, humility is a strength. Thus, when a humble person asserts "I am humble," she asserts, of a certain *strength* that she has *it*. But this very strength, on our view, consists in owning one's weaknesses. So in the very act of via which a humble person *asserts* that she has that strength, she *implies* that she has those weaknesses. There is a certain irony or internal tension in this implication of weakness via assertion of strength. This irony or internal tension might help to explain the self-defeatingness of a humble person asserting she is humble.

Second, the jolt to our expectations when a humble person asserts "I am humble" might be explained like this. We expect people generally to be sufficiently internally rational, and so to tend to behave in ways typical of the characters they display. Thus, since humble people who are sufficiently internally rational will tend not be arrogant, we expect humble people not to draw attention to their strengths, which it seems a humble person would be doing by asserting "I am humble" in contexts where such an assertion is objectionable.

## **6. Conclusion**

Have we uttered "the absolutely final word" on IH? Have we "found the truth and built an impregnable fortress around it"? Hardly. But we have offered an account of IH—Limitations-Owning—and we have tried to exhibit how it explains the plausibility of several pre-theoretic predictions about intellectually humble people and how it preserves what is right about some popular alternative accounts while avoiding their problems. Moreover, we have tried to answer the problem of self-focus and the problem of arrogance, and in so far as there is something genuinely strange about self-attributions of humility, we've tried to explain why it is so strange from the point of view of our

account. We conclude, therefore, not that we've uttered "the absolutely final word" on our subject, but rather that we've sketched an account of IH that shows some promise and should be taken seriously in our communal effort to gain a deeper understanding of that trait and virtue.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nozick 1974, xii. Cf. Sanchez 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen 2013, 10-11.

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<sup>3</sup> Tangney 2009.

<sup>4</sup> In this connection, see also Rowatt, *et al* 2006, 198-199, who partly “define” dispositional humility as being open-minded and respectful of others. Cf. Exline, *et al* 2004; Exline and Geyer 2004; Tangney 2000, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Kellenberger 2010, 324-325.

<sup>6</sup> Pinsent 2012 frames humility in Thomistic terms. Grubbs and Exline 2014 finds humility negatively correlated with anger at God and religious fear and guilt.

<sup>7</sup> Samuelson, *et al* 2015: 65. Also: “Intellectual humility, therefore, could be characterized simply as ‘holding a belief with the firmness merited’....believing in accordance with the evidence without claiming to know more (or less) than what the evidence merits” (Samuelson, *et al* 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Hazlett 2012, 220. Schwab offers something similar: “Epistemic humility is a characteristic of claims that accurately portray the quality of evidence for believing the claim to be an accurate one” (2012, 29).

<sup>9</sup> Taylor 1985, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Driver 2001, 114. Garcia 2007 and Kellenberger 2010 describe her view as a view about humility.

<sup>11</sup> Driver 2001: 21. Cp. Sidgwick: “For it is generally said that Humility prescribes a low opinion of our merits...” (1907/1962): 334.

<sup>12</sup> Roberts and Wood 2007, 236.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts and Wood 2007, 250-251.

<sup>14</sup> Roberts and Wood 2007, 236. They would qualify this with something like: “...due to a high intrinsic concern with epistemic goods, e.g. knowledge, etc.” That’s because they think that one cannot be intellectually humble unless one is motivated by a high intrinsic concern with epistemic goods. We don’t think that, however. We think that being motivated by a high intrinsic concern with epistemic goods is necessary for IH *to be an intellectual virtue*, but it is not necessary for one to have *the character trait* of IH. IH can have other motivational sources. Hence, we omit the qualifier while recognizing that Roberts and Wood would add it.

<sup>15</sup> One might suggest that, although IH does not consist in a disposition to underestimate one’s intellectual strengths, accomplishments, and so on, it does consist in a disposition to *accurately* estimate them. Robert Emmons: “[t]o be humble is not to have a low opinion of oneself, it is to have an accurate opinion of oneself” (quoted in Tangney 2000 and 2009). Norvin Richards: “being humble is not a matter of thinking poorly of oneself but (roughly) a matter of

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having oneself in perspective...It is not a matter of thinking that one's accomplishments and virtues come literally to naught, but just of esteeming them no more highly than they deserve" (1992: xii; cf Richards 1988). Relatedly, see Flanagan 1990, 424; Flanagan 1996, 176. In the same vein, Nuyen 1998: "Modesty [which is identified with humility] is equity with respect to one's own achievements" (108), where "equity requires that one acknowledges the role that other people and favourable circumstances play in one's success" (107), and thus requires one "to pull back a little from claiming the full credit for an achievement" (108). However, accurate estimation of one's strengths, achievements, etc.—even if equitably acknowledged—seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for IH for much the same reasons that underestimation seems to be neither necessary nor sufficient for IH. First, consider a person who is consistently motivated to get epistemic goods and, as a result, is aware of her intellectual limitations, and is disposed to respond appropriately to them. Even so, she might have been abusively belittled throughout her childhood when her strengths were manifested, so much so that she now consistently underestimates her strengths, accomplishments, and so on. We submit that she is lacking in intellectual proper pride, not IH. Accurate estimation is not required. Second, consider someone who accurately estimates his intellectual strengths, accomplishments, and the like but who has no inkling at all about his intellectual limitations, or who is strongly disposed to respond inappropriately to his awareness of them. This person is lacking in IH. Accurate estimation is not enough.

<sup>16</sup> More broadly, epistemic fanatics are so hyper-focused on epistemic goods that they forget everything else, including status and entitlement; however, they need not be intellectually humble. Cf. Montmarquet 1993, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Some theorists identify IH with appropriate attentiveness to one's intellectual limitations and taking appropriate action in response to them, e.g. Spiegel 2003, 2012. Others identify IH with something more than that but, in so far as they weave something about limitations into their account, they either don't go beyond attentiveness, or attentiveness and appropriate action in response, e.g. Grenberg 2005, Kidd 2015.

<sup>18</sup> On positive empirical correlations between humility and success in the treatment of alcoholism, see Kurtz and Ketchum 1992 and Hart and Huggett 2003.

<sup>19</sup> *The Washington Post*, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Cp. Snow 1995, 210: "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". Note also that there may well be a redundancy in the way we have stated our view of what IH is. For we have identified IH with a combination of two

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things: (i) a certain sort of attentiveness and (ii) a certain sort of owning. And it may well be that (ii) entails (i). If it does, there is a redundancy in the way we have stated the view. We retain our current statement nonetheless because we think that it nicely summarizes our discussion thus far.

<sup>21</sup> This is a requirement, in any case, for one familiar and important conception of virtue. See Baehr 2011, chapter 6; Battaly 2015, chapter 3. We are open to the possibility of other conceptions of virtue for which the relevant kind of motivation is neither necessary nor sufficient: e.g. a strict reliabilist or consequentialist conception. However, this is not the conception of virtue we are interested in here.

<sup>22</sup> Two notes in one. (1) We say an *appropriate* desire for epistemic goods. The desire for epistemic goods can be pathologically obsessive, and so an appropriate desire for epistemic goods requires the virtue of epistemic temperance. See Battaly 2010. (2) Motives that make one a good person intellectually may also make one a good person morally. On whether moral and intellectual virtues are distinct, see Baehr 2011, 206-222, and Battaly 2014, 177-187.

<sup>23</sup> On humility in business, see Friedman 2014. As for the greedy manager, see Owens 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Relatedly, see Richards 1988, 258.

<sup>25</sup> On the self-serving bias, see Mezulis *et al* 2004.

<sup>26</sup> See Tangney 2000, 2009; Exline and Geyer 2004; Exline 2008; Leary and Terry 2012. In fact, some theorists seem to think that this turn away from the self and toward others is definitive of humility. See Davis, *et al* 2010 and Davis *et al* 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Proponents of the problem of arrogance include Snow 1995, 210, and Garcia 2006, 425.

<sup>28</sup> Garcia 2006, 418.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> For example: humility is “a nondefensive willingness to see the self accurately, including both strengths and limitations” (Exline 2008, 56). Cf Exline, *et al* 2004a, Exline, *et al* 2004b, Sandage 1999.

<sup>31</sup> More carefully: she desires all the logical consequences of all her *unconditional* desires. Thus, if an agent desires that she will die painlessly, internal rationality does not require that she desires that she will die; and this is so even though *that she will die painlessly* entails *that she will die*. For the desire to die painlessly is a *conditional* desire; it



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is conditional on the fact (or perhaps the belief) that one will die. However, if an agent desires happiness—plausibly, the sort of thing one desires unconditionally—then she also desires whatever is entailed by happiness, e.g. existence.

<sup>32</sup> Garcia 2006, 427, adopting Driver 2001, 17.

<sup>33</sup> “True humility, therefore, never knows that it is humble...; for if it knew this, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue” (Martin Luther, quoted in Richards 1988, 259n11).

<sup>34</sup> The last case is no mere philosophical example. Research on the relationship between humility and successful business management is beginning to suggest a high correlation between successful companies, on the one hand, and humility as a chief trait, or at least a perceived trait, of a CEO, on the other. See Owens *et al* 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Cp. Flanagan 1990, 423, and Garcia 2006, 427-428.

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