

# Humility – A Religious and Philosophical Exploration of the Term

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## I. Introduction

The best way to begin our analysis is to define the term “humility.” That’s not as easy as it sounds. People speak about humility in different ways depending on the context. In each case, it refers to a self-assessment in which we see ourselves as limited or small. But these assessments can involve a number of ways in which human beings can be evaluated. Does humility assess how *significant* we think we are? How *entitled*? How capable or powerful? How virtuous? How we rank relative to other people? Where we fit in the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being? If you answered, “All of the Above,” give yourself a checkmark.

Humility is commonly understood by what it is *not* – in other words, by its antonym. But even there we find multiple candidates. Is the opposite of humility, pride? Is it hubris? Narcissism? Self-exaltation? When you think in terms of those last three antonym candidates, it’s no wonder humility is so frequently praised. Self-exaltation, even if reality based, is seen as obnoxious when we observe it in others. As for hubris or narcissism, when this elevates a person’s self-appraisal or self-obsession to levels bearing no relationship to his talents, achievements or character, we find this behavior downright pathetic. If that’s what humility is *not*, then sign us up! If, however, a humble person is one who lacks pride, well that’s a different story – for pride is often crucial to enabling us to function independently and productively. Few of us want to learn that our daughter just got engaged to a man who hasn’t an ounce of pride – that’s not a man, that’s a piñata.

For the above reasons, any definition of humility that takes into account the different ways the word is used in society needs to be compound. It especially needs to take into account both the notion of how much we think *of* ourselves and how much we think *about* ourselves. And so I offer you the following working definition, to be revisited later: *humility is the state of feeling relatively unimpressed or unconcerned by the worth or significance of oneself as an individual.*

From the standpoint of the most prominent organized religions, we are talking about what is arguably the virtue of virtues. By contrast, the great philosophers may take humility off its pedestal and even treat it more as a vice. But what I’ve found ironic in studying this concept is that devotion to an organized religion may actually undermine a person’s humility, whereas a philosophical life can enhance our humility in certain profound respects. In this essay, I will try to demonstrate this irony and to show why, when humility is viewed as broadly and critically as possible, it emerges not only as a virtue but as an indispensable one.

## II. Humility and the World’s Great Religions: The Ideal and the Often-Tragic Reality

From the perspective of the world’s great religions, few if any virtues are as prominent as humility. Not only is the religious hero inevitably the “most humble,” but perhaps the defining characteristic of the disciple is to emulate that humility. Without it, disciples run the risk of being spotted to the community as imposters, if not threats.

As I have defined the term, it is difficult to imagine any religious faith exalting humility more than Hinduism, the oldest of the world's great religions and the foundation of a younger faith known as Buddhism. A study of the Upanishads, the ancient texts containing many of Hinduism's core tenets, reveals that humility as we understand the term is a by-product of a devotion to this faith. Few beliefs are as central in the Upanishads as the unity of being in a transcendent Self. All individual egos are seen as mere expressions of a universal, ground of being. Accordingly, to allow our egos to run wild and our passions to come to the fore is to achieve the opposite of enlightenment. It is to place oneself out of harmony with our true self, which is indistinguishable from pure existence. To the enlightened Hindu, there is no room for pride in one's distinct self. The devotee is urged instead to commune in peace with the Absolute One of which we all are mere expressions. To be sure, Hindus aren't self-consciously humble. But once the baggage of their ego is tossed aside, their attitude about themselves would surely come across as humble to any Western observer. The obsession with the "I" would then be gone, leaving a glow from the recognition of the "We," or more precisely the "One." In other words, without a consciousness of a separate ego to motivate a restless soul, there would be nothing left to undermine humility, and the soul would fill simply with love. It is that state of mind that characterizes the Hindu saint, such as Gandhi, who went as far as to teach that non-violence, the heart of his ethical philosophy, is impossible without humility.

The Faiths of Abraham may have been less inclined to rid of us of our egos root and branch, but were no less willing to extol humility as a critical virtue. We begin with the oldest of these faiths, Judaism. In Moses, who is taken to be the greatest of the Jewish prophets, we find the reluctant leader who questioned whether he was up for the job but nonetheless led the Jews out of slavery, gave them a set of laws and principles for living, and brought them to the threshold of their promised land. Nowhere are Jews told that Moses was the most courageous, intelligent or knowledgeable of prophets, and he certainly wasn't the best orator. Instead, we're taught that he distinguished himself first and foremost by his humility. The Torah teaches, in fact, that "Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth." (Num. 12:3)

Abraham was also no slouch in that department. You might recall the scene in Genesis where three strangers come to Abraham's tent. "As soon as he saw them," Genesis tells us, Abraham "ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, 'My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; gather your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on – seeing that you have come your servant's way.'" (Gen. 18:2-5) Such behavior epitomizes what we would view as humble – bowing to the ground before strangers, feeding them, ensuring that their feet are cleaned, and finally, referring to oneself as their servant. Centuries later, King David would frequently use the same term "servant" to refer to himself – only this time the master he was referring to is God.

The notion of a human being as a servant or subject of the Lord has become an accepted form of Jewish parlance ever since. The humility taught by this title is further emphasized when Hebraic texts flesh out in vivid terms the difference between the human and the Divine. Consider, for example, the following verse from the portion of the Talmud known as *Pirkei Avot*, or the *Ethics of the Fathers*: "Akavyah ben Mahalalel said: Reflect on three things and you will not come into the grip of sin: know whence you came, whither you are going, and before whom you are destined to give a strict account. *Whence you came* – from a malodorous drop; *whither you are going* – to a place of dust, worms and moths; *and before whom you are destined to give*

*a strict account* – before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be he.”<sup>1</sup> After reading statements like that, and taking note of the values associated with our greatest prophets, it is no wonder that religious Jews view humility as among their faith’s primary virtues.

If anything, Christianity upped the ante. In the figure of Christ on the Cross you have, perhaps, the most direct tribute to humility imaginable. Here you have God’s only child, not dressed in regal robes, but willingly allowing himself to be stripped practically bare and tortured savagely until his dying breath – all so that Jesus could best serve God and humankind as our Savior. If the example of Jesus’s death wasn’t enough, we have the various teachings of his life, which again reinforce the example of Moses, Abraham and David before him. I could, of course, point to various actions of Jesus, such as the occasion when he washed his disciples’ feet (John 13:5), or the oft quoted saying, “blessed are the meek, who shall inherit the earth.” (Matt. 5:5). But I would rather showcase my favorite passage in the Christian Bible, which also reveals a commitment to humility: “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22:27)

So there once again we see that the religious person is the polar opposite of the pig at the trough. Jesus recognizes that money and power have typically been the coin of the earthly realm. But the truly religious person must put aside the ego and practice an ethic of selflessness and love. “Please have a seat, let me serve you.” That has been the mark of a true Christian from the time of Augustine (who equated humility with loving and obeying God and saw pride as the beginning of sin) to the time of Mother Theresa (who taught us to be gentle even when provoked, accept others’ mistakes, and cheerfully allow them to criticize us). A devoted servant be not proud, you see, and a religious person is a devoted servant.

As for the youngest of the Abrahamic Faiths, humility is built into the very meaning of the word “Islam,” which means to submit or surrender – in this case to the will of God. Muhammad himself is said to be “the most humble,” which is reflected in how he treated his servants as equals and was kind to the poor and needy. Muslims also point to Muhammad’s decision to prohibit visual depictions of himself and other prophets, lest these depictions lead to idolizing human beings, thereby insulting God.

“Do not turn your cheek away disdainfully from the people,” the Qur’an teaches, “and do not walk boastfully on the earth. Indeed, God does not like any swaggering braggart. Be modest in your bearing, and lower your voice. Indeed, the ungainliest of voices is the donkey’s voice.” (Qur’an 31:18-19).<sup>2</sup> In a separate chapter, the Qur’an states that “The servants of the All-beneficent are those who walk humbly on the earth, and when the ignorant address them, they say words of peace.” (Qur’an 25:63).

You get the idea. When it comes to the great world religions, the verdict is in: humility is a fundamental virtue. Its affirmation is near the top of people’s thoughts whenever it is said that, in essence, the sages of the great faiths teach the same basic truths.

But just because humility is *preached* at church, doesn’t entail that it is universally *practiced*. In fact, so often the opposite is the case. In my view, that alone provides much of the explanation for why the fastest growing religion in the world is “none of the above.”

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<sup>1</sup> Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1986), p. 492.

<sup>2</sup> Citations to the Qur’an are taken from *The Qur’an & the Bible*, Gabriel Said Reynolds (Yale, 2018).

We have spoken of humility as a fundamental value that is associated with religion in theory, and we have explained how this value dates back thousands of years. But if we turn to more recent history and to our experiences of the contemporary world, organized religion takes on a different look. With faith, it appears, so flows the mentality of tribalism, an ethos that is often hateful, even violent, whenever an individual or group is seen as a threat to the tribe. With faith, it appears, so flows the dogmatic mentality that “I possess the one ultimate truth about God, and if you’re not in my group, you don’t.” With faith, it appears, so flows the mentality that my Scripture has divine sanction, whereas yours has been corrupted.” With faith, it appears, so flows the mentality that “My prophets were real and their miracles happened, whereas your prophets are imposters and their so-called miracles are laughable.” With faith, it appears, so flows the mentality that “My behavior is blessed by the will of God, whereas yours is often evil, even when it only involves consenting adults.”

Lest this comes across as a broadside against theism, much of what I just said can equally apply to the dogmatism of the so-called New Atheists. They, too, have formed a tribe of sorts – albeit one forged by ideology and not by history or ethnicity. They, too, believe that they possess the ultimate truth – if not by what they accept, then by what they reject. They, too, see the leading writings of their fellow “Brights” as being profoundly true, whereas the texts of the old-time religion are rejected as antiquated. In short, like many representatives of the traditional faiths, the New Atheists’ ability to disrespect and condescend is as much on display as their ability to love.

Still, there is something especially fascinating about the behavior of the theists because their frequently immodest conduct can be contrasted with such a long tradition that extols humility. After their prophets and sages preach this holy value, the followers organize, rally around a system of conduct or beliefs, proclaim their own views to be enlightened, and decry the views of the *other*. From faith comes a sense of certitude, a sense of having won the cosmic lottery by making the perfect choice on the most critical of decisions. From religious community comes the fear of invasions or other threats. And so – the faithful take matters into their own hands and act to better the position of their blessed community, no matter the cost. What’s more, the faithful can respond to threats in the most dramatic of ways and still call themselves humble; such is the flexibility of the term. Humility is to surrender to the wisdom of the enlightened ones, the authority figures who have been proclaimed the most humble. Anything the faithful do or say in support of these authority figures can be rationalized as virtuous and commendable. And this is why some of the most violent of religious people can feel blissfully secure in their virtue at the same time they crusade against infidels, blowing up buildings packed with civilians or sending one tribe on a trail of tears to make room for another. Their humility has become a vessel for fanaticism. The more they submit, the less they question and the more donkey-like they behave, even if they don’t see themselves as an ass.

To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, religion makes good people better, and bad people worse. We’ve looked a bit into the latter point. Soon, it will be time to take stock in the former. I will argue later in this essay that the great world religions, notwithstanding the abuses described above, are truly to be *praised* for extolling a virtue as beautiful as humility. For when these faiths are pursued with common sense and, if possible, secular learning, they can produce the kind of subtle thinking and compassion that is worthy of the term “enlightenment.” But before we get there, let’s leave the realm of religion and enter that of secular philosophy. There we will find a much different story – and in some respects, a diametrically opposite one.

### III. Humility Through the Lens of Secular Philosophy

Given how attracted many secular philosophers are to traditional religion, it's not surprising that the so-called "virtue of humility" has admirers in the domain of philosophy. But the attraction goes far beyond the intersection of philosophy and religion. To the extent "humility" refers to the refusal to think higher of oneself than is deserved or warranted, philosophers overwhelmingly support this disposition. For no principle more unifies philosophers than the value of following the truth wherever it leads, and to the extent humility is contrasted with hubris, which by definition requires an *excess* of pride or self-confidence, philosophers are bound to support humility as the sane and sensible choice.

To be a philosopher, however, is to recognize that there are other alternatives to humility than hubris. And that is why when I reviewed the philosophical literature on humility, I was struck by how many of the great secular thinkers were fundamentally critical of this disposition despite all the praise that has traditionally been heaped upon it. Let's take a look at a number of those philosophers whose stance on humility has been largely, if not primarily, negative.

Aristotle is one such thinker. In Book 4 of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle analyzes the moral virtues as the mean between two extremes, or vices. Perhaps the most central of these virtues -- the one in which all others converge -- is *megalopsychia*. This has been translated as "great souled," "high-minded," or simply as "proud." The proud person, to Aristotle, is truly great. They are concerned with exalted matters, such as honor, which Aristotle calls the "greatest of external goods."<sup>3</sup> And they think of themselves as worthy of high things but only because they *are* worthy of them; in other words, their high opinion of themselves is not inflated, but deserved. The proud person, Aristotle teaches, is gentlemanly, candid, willing to help others, and disposed against asking others for help. They are "haughty towards people who enjoy prestige and good fortune, and unassuming towards those of the middle class."<sup>4</sup> In short, the proud person, as depicted by Aristotle, is the person with the most *dignity* and *nobility* -- at least as Aristotle understands those terms.

If "pride" is a mean or virtue for Aristotle, what are the vices associated with it? Depending on the translation you prefer, they can be referred to in terms of "conceit" or "vanity," on the one extreme, and "humility" or "diffidence," on the other. For Aristotle, "diffidence [or humility] is more opposed to pride than vanity is; for it is both commoner and worse."<sup>5</sup> Aristotle goes on to describe these humble people in stark terms. They "stand back even from noble actions and undertakings, deeming themselves unworthy, and from external goods no less."<sup>6</sup> Their great humility, in other words, prevents them from achieving or even possessing great things because their lack of self-confidence serves as a constant drag on their ambitions. So much for the meek inheriting the earth.

Spinoza thought better of humility than Aristotle, but he wasn't exactly a huge fan. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza defines humility as "a Sadness born of the fact that a man considers his own lack

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<sup>3</sup> *Aristotle's Ethics: Writings from the Complete Works*, Edited by Jonathan Barnes and Anthony Kenny (Princeton, 2014), p. 289.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, p. 291.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, p. 293.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

of power, or weakness.”<sup>7</sup> Spinoza explains this assessment by the statement that humility is opposed to “self-esteem,” which is a “Joy born of the fact that we consider our power of acting.”<sup>8</sup> If you know your Spinoza, you understand just how highly he values self-esteem – which tells you all you need to know about how little he admired humility. Later in the *Ethics*, Spinoza makes this assessment ever so clear: “Humility is not a virtue, [n]or does it arise from reason.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, humility is a “passion” that reflects a person perceiving some lack of power in himself that makes him sad. By contrast, Spinoza contends, if a person conceived that he lacked certain power because he truly understood something about himself or the world, then he wouldn’t be sad about it and his power of acting wouldn’t be depressed as a result.

Clearly, for Spinoza, the best approach – the *virtuous* approach – is to see the world through the lens of reason, recognize our limitations and strengths for what they are, and rejoice in ourselves and our world without guilt, shame or any other pain-based emotion. However, as he points out, “men rarely live from the dictate of reason,” and because of that, such pain-based passions as repentance and humility generally “bring more advantage than disadvantage.”<sup>10</sup> So Spinoza did recognize that for those who are not enlightened enough to deal reasonably with their limitations, it is often better to feel badly about our mistakes and our hubris rather than to revel in them and repeat them. After all, humility has the advantage of chastening people – of restraining and disciplining their conduct – so they don’t endanger societal security.<sup>11</sup> To quote Spinoza, “it would take too long to enumerate all the evils of Pride,” which he defines as a “Joy born of the fact that man thinks more highly of himself than is just.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, this is a far more charitable view of humility than Aristotle’s, who saw humility as even worse than vanity or hubris. I wonder if Aristotle would have made the same assessment if he lived in present-day Washington D.C. or 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland instead of ancient Greece.

Moving toward the present, the list of philosophers critical of humility continues to grow. Hume, for example, was a proponent of *appearing* to others to be humble, while actually being prideful and self-confident. Reasoning on this point as a true Machiavellian, Hume pointed out that “an excessive pride or over-weaning conceit of ourselves is always esteem’d vicious and is universally hated; [whereas] modesty or a just sense of our weakness is esteem’d virtuous and procures the good-will of everyone.”<sup>13</sup> But Hume goes on to state that whereas others find our pride or self-applause disagreeable, we ourselves benefit from it to the point where “all those great actions and sentiments, which have become the admiration of mankind, are founded on nothing but pride and self-esteem.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Hume counsels the “man of honor” to put on the air of humility, “which good-breeding and decency require of us,” while secretly possessing a “genuine and hearty pride or self-esteem.”<sup>15</sup> So, humility is praised by Hume – as long as it’s a phony humility, and as long as it is undergirded by pride and the ambition that flows from it.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ethics*, Part III, Definition of the Affects, XXVI. This translation is from *The Complete Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, by Edwin Curley (Princeton, 1985), p. 536.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, *Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. 53, Curley p. 575.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, *Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. 54, Curley p. 576.

<sup>11</sup> *See id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, *Ethics*, Part IV, Prop. 57, Curley p. 577.

<sup>13</sup> *A Treatise on Human Nature*, David Hume (Oxford, 1980), Section 3.3.2, p. 592.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, p. 599.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

That pride is what gives us the self-concept we need in order to ennoble ourselves. I wouldn't exactly call that a rave review for the quality of humility.

Just as Hume built on Aristotle's critique of humility and gave it a Machiavellian twist, Nietzsche built on Hume's critique. Nietzsche turned humility into one of the primary virtues of the so-called "slave morality," to which he opposed the "master morality." The latter is based on true nobility – or to use Nietzsche's words, a "triumphant self-affirmation."<sup>16</sup> It is the morality of candor, courage and yes-saying – just the kind of dignity and commitment to excellence that Aristotle's man of pride would have exhibited. By contrast, Nietzsche's slave morality began with a revolt *against* the classic Greek virtues by people who could never compete in terms of true nobility. With the slave morality revolt, what formerly came across as a virtue now comes across as a vice, and vice versa. This reversal is all very secretive, of course, as nobody would publicly say that the reason why such slave virtues as meekness, weakness, and humility shall inherit the earth is because they can be potent tools in a power grab. But that kind of stealthy fight is exactly how the clergy and their fellow travelers took the upper hand in society, according to Nietzsche. Once again, "humility" becomes a utilitarian utensil as it was for Hume – not an attribute worthy of honor, but one that has come to be associated with honor in a society full of duplicity.

Finally, moving to contemporary times, I offer the assessment of University of Texas philosopher Paul Woodruff, whose beautiful book, *Reverence*, contained the following discussion of humility. "Reverence is not humility," Woodruff said. "The opposite of reverence is hubris – which is always a bad thing – but the opposite of humility is pride, and pride can be a good thing. The reverent soul has much to be proud of, and should be proud. Leaders should be proud of their teams and of their missions. Humility smacks of obedience to authority, sometimes even of obsequiousness. But a reverent soul can stand up to authority and is never obsequious. Humility in a person with authority is usually a fraud, and the reverent soul does not stoop to fraud."<sup>17</sup>

I include Woodruff's quotation together with an examination of Aristotle, Spinoza, Hume and Nietzsche not because he joins them in the pantheon of secular philosophers, but because he has summarized well the philosophical notion that humility has become a tool for social climbers and other phonies. It doesn't describe how we feel so much as how we *pose*. We act humbly to make others feel comfortable with us, unthreatened by us, compassionate for us. We wear our "humility" like a mask in order to manipulate other people into believing that we are the kind of person Woodruff classifies as reverent: someone who is able to feel awe, respect or shame whenever the situation calls for it. But as to how we truly see ourselves, we had better feel pride if we want to accomplish anything in this world. If we are too humble to have the self-confidence that only pride provides, our projects are surely doomed to failure. Such are the teachings of philosopher after philosopher after philosopher.

And yet, once I put aside what philosophers have to say about humility explicitly and consider what the discipline of philosophy has to teach us as a whole, I am struck by another irony no less profound than the distinction between religious-humility in theory and in practice. Philosophy, for all its teachers' criticism of humility, is among the most humbling of human

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<sup>16</sup> From *The Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche, First Essay Section X, as published in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals* (Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, Paul Woodruff (Oxford, 2014), p. 61.

activities. Its very essence is to *demand* humility from its practitioners. Otherwise, they wouldn't be philosophers, they'd be dogmatists, and there is no human condition less philosophical than that.

Consider, for example, the term “philosophical humility.” From the days of Socrates and Plato, students of philosophy must keep in mind the teaching that the wisest person in the world is the one who realizes that there is no great philosophical teaching we can truly know with certainty – except perhaps that one. Karl Jaspers put the point well. “The Greek word for philosopher (*philosophos*) connotes a distinction from *sophos*. It signifies the lover of wisdom (knowledge) as distinguished from him who considers himself wise in the possession of knowledge. This meaning of the word still endures: the essence of philosophy is not the possession of truth but the search for truth, regardless of how many philosophers may belie it with their dogmatism, that is, with a body of didactic principles purporting to be definitive and complete. Philosophy means to be on the way. Its questions are more essential than its answers, and every answer becomes a new question.”<sup>18</sup> Lessing said something similar two centuries earlier: “If God were to hold all Truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left only the steady and diligent drive for Truth, albeit with the proviso that I would always and forever err in the process, and to offer me the choice, I would with all humility take the left hand.”<sup>19</sup> Notice the insertion of the phrase, “with all humility.” To be a philosopher behaving as such is to approach the task of learning wisdom with every ounce of humility that it requires.

Aristotle must have understood these points, and not only because he was Plato's student. When he writes of the virtues as means between two extremes, he recognizes the delicate balance at play whenever virtue ethics is involved. Aristotelian ethics is not an exercise in black versus white or good versus evil. It requires great discernment among shades of grey – for surely, when one looks at the continuum from cowardice to courage to foolhardiness, for example, one is often unsure of where vice ends and virtue begins.

As for Hume, this same thinker who wrote of humility as something we should only pretend to possess was actually an exemplar of what we have called philosophical humility. Famously, he even challenged whether from the fact that the sun has always risen in the past we can conclusively induce that the sun will rise tomorrow. Like so many other philosophers, his skeptical path involves constantly challenging our assumptions, refusing to stop at simple, common sense conclusions, and questioning whether our innermost convictions are accurate or mistaken. It is difficult to imagine a more humbling approach to life than that.

Then there is Spinoza – he who tried to deduce all of the world's greatest secrets from a small number of basic axioms and definitions. Surely he is a know-at-all who lacks humility, right? Not so fast. Spinoza acknowledged in one of his letters that “I do not presume that I have discovered the best Philosophy,”<sup>20</sup> nor would you expect him to, given that his God possesses infinite attributes the majority of which are thoroughly unknowable to human kind.<sup>21</sup> To live in Spinoza's world is to see oneself, like any other human being, merely as one of infinitely many interconnected and often clashing modes who would be so much wiser if only we could always

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<sup>18</sup> *Way to Wisdom*, Karl Jaspers (Yale, 1954), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> From Lessing's *Anti-Goeze* (1778).

<sup>20</sup> Letter 76 to Albert Burgh, OP IV/320a 2-3, reprinted in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Edwin Curley, Volume II (Princeton, 2016), p. 475.

<sup>21</sup> Letter 56 to Hugo Boxel, OP IV/261 12-14, reprinted in Curley, Volume II, p. 423



understand the causal connections involving these modes, which we can't. To be a Spinozist, in short, is to take infinity seriously – and to contrast it with the limitations that are obvious whenever we reflect on the pathos of the human condition. It is no wonder, given how humbling this world view is, that Spinoza concluded his *Ethics* with the sobering principle that “All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”<sup>22</sup>

That, of course, leaves Nietzsche, whose ethical philosophy has come to be antithetical to anything remotely resembling humility. Well I won't try to dispel that notion. But what I will point out is the example of his life, which cannot be lost on any of his present-day readers. Here you have a man who lived only 44 years – the same number Spinoza spent on this earth – before going completely mad and then passing away 11 years later. Whether Nietzsche's disciples believe, as many do, that his demise was as a result of syphilis, they can't help but agree that he was spawned from a malodorous drop of semen and was destined to go, roughly a half-century later, to a place of dust, worms and moths. His greatness, perhaps, lies in part in having the will to affirm this world of ours, considered as a totality, notwithstanding the dark way that he viewed so much of reality. But one again, we are faced with the perspective that compared to the grandeur of our mountains, seas, or sky, not to mention the depth of space or the possibility of unknowable universes, the human condition in all its limitations can be deeply exasperating and humbling to any serious philosophical thinker, including disciples of Nietzsche.

#### **IV. Beyond the Ironies of the Story – Placing Both Humility and Pride in Their Proper Place**

Allow me to summarize what's been said. When it comes to the quality of humility, there seems to be great irony in the way organized religion and philosophy treat the topic in theory as opposed to practice. In theory, traditional religion extols humility as perhaps the greatest of virtues. In practice, the tribalism, dogmatism and Pollyannaism that these religions preach have spawned some of the most patently unhumble people imaginable. I would even argue that the term “religious hypocrisy” may be used as much because of that dichotomy as because of any other difference between religion in theory and in practice. As for philosophy, it is possible that the reason so many philosophers have dissed humility as a concept is because it has been so unambiguously praised in the domain of religion – in other words, the purity of its value has been exaggerated. Still, I am struck by the extent to which philosophers speak poorly of this concept while, at the same time, a sincere adherence to their teachings could not help but humble us in profound ways.

Maybe you are similarly struck by these two ironies, maybe not. But now, let's move on from them and conclude this essay by considering what we ourselves think of humility now that we've heard what various religions and philosophers have said about it. Are there ways in which we see it as an ethical ideal? Or do we actually think of it as a vice? And if the answer is that it can be either, depending on the situation, let's explore what we mean by that.

To begin, we should put an end to the demonization of pride. I recognize that the Book of Proverbs states explicitly that “Pride goes before ruin, arrogance before failure. Better to be humble and among the lowly than to share spoils with the proud.” (Prov. 16: 18-19) But like much that is written in the ancient Scriptures, we act at our peril if we take these words literally. The philosophers are surely correct that to the extent humility refers to a dearth of pride, it is a

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<sup>22</sup> *Ethics* Part V, Prop. 42, OP II/308 26-27, reprinted in Curley, Volume 1, p. 617.

vice. For without pride, there can be no self-confidence, and if we're not confident in what we do, we can almost guarantee our failure when we attempt any worthy task. Excessive pride? Now that is a vice. But one doesn't have to think of less of oneself than is warranted in order to avoid excessive pride. As Aristotle teaches us, the goal is the mean, and the mean is to assess one's abilities as realistically as possible and be confident that we can accomplish what is within our powers to achieve.

Now once we've done away with the need to choose between pride and humility, we no longer need to put on airs of being more "humble" than we know ourselves to be. Nor do we need to suck up to authority figures in the workplace or the church, as if it is our place to serve our "betters" and theirs to rule. When it comes to the way we act in society, I prefer to focus on a Yiddish word that some view as the epitome of obnoxious gall and others (myself included) see as an asset. The word is *chutzpah*. People with *chutzpah* don't suck up, they stand up -- for themselves and their principles. They fight battles others say are pointless. Sometimes, they even win. People with *chutzpah* are commonly viewed as the opposite of humble because they don't seem to know their "place" in society. To me, however, that is a good thing, because nobody but oneself has the right to define our place in society. For all his talk of being a "servant," King David had plenty of *chutzpah*. So did Jesus, Muhammad and countless others -- including folks like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks who had no interest in letting societal powers keep them down because of superficial characteristics like their skin color.

Whether you agree with me that *chutzpah* is a virtue, can we at least agree that the primary determinant of our humility is not the amount of *chutzpah* we exhibit. Humility has little to do with our willingness to accept the role society has given us. Just look at the example of MLK, Jr. He was humble alright, and he had no interest in playing the role he was assigned. What makes him so great and so humble is that he was fundamentally unconcerned with himself relative to various matters of broader significance, like the divisions in society, the pursuit of justice, or the beauty of God. King was so consumed by these lofty topics that he was willing to go to jail to fight for his ideals. His narrow self-interest was far from the center of his thoughts. And that is a fundamental mark of humility. To quote one of King's followers, Pastor Rick Warren, "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

Speaking personally, when I consider the meaning of humility, I return to what is perhaps the most recognized set of images in the history of philosophy: Plato's Parable of the Cave. But I'd like to adapt that parable and give it a contemporary touch. Think of the infighting that goes on in society -- the struggles between classes, races, genders and tribes -- as shadows on a cave wall. When most of us go to the office and get work done, we're interpreting those shadows and figuring out ways to utilize them to benefit our own projects, often at the expense of someone else's. Now consider the time we spend engaged in higher contemplation or devotion -- whether the object is God, nature, another human being, or such concepts as justice, peace or freedom. Think of that as time spent having left the cave and standing in the sunlight. Outside the cave we can breathe, we stop being in the thrall of time, status, money and worldly power, and we can turn our attention to matters so capacious-yet-deep that they transcend the typical obsessions of any earthly society.

The humble person, in the virtuous sense of the word, is one who lives primarily in the sunlight. Once they enter that domain, once they experience how it feels to contemplate or revere, never again can they elevate the petty concerns of society to an ultimate status. In the

sunlight, the notion of the “I” as a narrow concept referring to a single individual with a name and a unique consciousness and body becomes a whole lot less important. Hubris becomes silly – because the mere act of falling all over yourself because you’ve won at some game or obtained an expensive toy is seen as worthy of a cave dweller, not an enlightened being.

As for the time we spend in a cave, perhaps “humility” as conventionally understood is no longer a virtue. But neither is hubris. When it comes to our self-concept in the cave, we’d be wise to adopt Spinoza’s idea that wisdom lies in thinking and acting in accordance with reason. This means that we don’t treat other people as means to an end, and we don’t lie to them or ourselves about who we are and what we’re capable of doing. We play it straight. Get our work done. And then get the hell out of the cave. After all, knowing that the outdoors exists, why would we want to live our entire life as troglodytes?

But here’s the rub – when we enter the sunlight and engage in contemplation or devotion, we often remind ourselves that we are indeed human beings, and as such, much of our happiness and most of our duty requires us to live in society where we can teach, learn, nurture and build, often under difficult circumstances. So we must return to the cave day after day – to commune, to work, sometimes even to fight. That back-and-forth between sunlight and cave – between the pursuit of personal enlightenment and the engagement of potentially stressful societal pursuits -- may cause all sorts of cognitive dissonance that tests both our pride *and* our humility. For when we are struggling inside the cave and then taking those struggles outside into the sunlight, it becomes difficult not to obsess about our own petty concerns, insecurities and anxieties. It therefore becomes difficult in the sense of the word Warren was talking about – the highest sense of the word -- to remain humble. Paradoxically, you see, true humility requires inner-peace and self-esteem; in other words, it requires a healthy dose of pride.

And that brings me back to religion. Truth be told, I first embarked on this essay not because of a philosophical interest in the topic but because of a religious one. I had been telling people that the three fundamental religious values other than love, which of course is paramount, are dignity, gratitude and humility. Having already written and delivered essays on dignity and gratitude, I decide to take on humility. You might think from what has been said that I’ve seized upon this quality as a philosophical virtue that religion ironically undermines. But that needn’t be true. Oh, I may recognize humility as a by-product of leaving the cave and entering the domain that philosophers see as enlightenment. But when the time comes to behold the Platonic form of humility, the *beauty* that is humility, it’s a religious impulse that I am left with.

Religion teaches us to be grateful to the source of life. It also teaches us to honor the dignity of all of forms of life, including human beings. And religion further teaches us to recognize and revere the *Ultimate* – the One who is Most High. Whether it’s an anthropomorphic ideal, a cosmic force, or a synthesis of all infinite domains, the *Ultimate One* becomes the *Ultimate Concern* to the religious mind. And we ourselves necessarily become more of an after-thought and more of a servant. That is what religion preaches, and it’s hardly antithetical to the discipline of philosophy.

The philosopher in me won’t allow myself to denounce pride. But the deeper beauty lies in humility, at least if you’re religious. Those feelings that come with contemplation and devotion – or, to be redundant, unconditional love – can be heaven on earth to anyone humble enough to experience them as a regular part of their lives. What’s more, to be religious, at least in the Abrahamic sense of the term, is to locate ourselves within a world belonging to God, which you

can't do without practicing humility. I must add, however, that without philosophy – without a discipline constantly inveighing against excessive-tribalism, dogmatism and Pollyannaism – a religious person can easily fool herself about what it means to practice humility. That's how a beautiful concept can quickly turn to ugliness and even do damage.

I am reminded of a proposition in Spinoza's *Ethics*, "He who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return."<sup>23</sup> Goethe was referring to this very proposition when he said, "that marvelous saying ... with all the premises on which it rests and the consequences that flow from it, permeated my whole thinking."<sup>24</sup> Contemplating that line, and everything else I've studied on the subject, I've come to conclude that humility is found in disciplining your mind not to take itself too seriously while allowing your heart to flow generously and outwardly. *To love, to admire and to revere, without requiring anything in return, that is humility when expressed as a virtue.* And to live a life filled with unselfish love, admiration and reverence, that is what it means to be a humble person in the highest sense of the term.

It is indeed as difficult as it is rare.

Of course, humility is only one of a number of moral virtues, and we can seek this quality by taking a number of paths. The key for me, as Aristotle would have recognized, is balance. Virtue requires a healthy dose of each of these sometimes-conflicting items – humility, pride, religion and philosophy. With pride we build confidence in ourselves so that our feet can soar; with humility we chasten ourselves so that our hearts can soar. With religion we venerate and at times celebrate; with philosophy, we investigate and at times castigate, but only in the name of truth and other lofty values. These are all precious concepts, each having its place – and that is precisely why we must stop abusing them.

You see, in researching for this talk, I was perhaps most struck by the attention commentators devoted to humility as a *ruse* – a tool for impressing others by deceiving them as to how much we think of ourselves or about ourselves. Let's show humility more respect than that. Let's please be candid as to who and what we are. Whether that's being humble, prideful, or (God forbid) hubristic, let's at least not be phonies.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ethics*, Part V, Prop. 19, Curley, p. 604.

<sup>24</sup> See *The Youth of Goethe*, Hume Brown (New York: Dutton, 1913), p. 210, reprinted in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, Edited by Michael Della Rocca, (Oxford Press, 2018), p. 634.