



## **Humility and Understanding**

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**DRAFT**For the *Handbook of Virtue Epistemology*,  
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## Humility and Understanding<sup>1</sup>

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We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

*The United States  
Declaration of Independence*

### 1. Introduction

This paper is in some ways an update and refinement of “Humility and Epistemic Goods,”<sup>2</sup> so it may be useful to indicate continuities and discontinuities with the earlier paper. Like it, this one treats humility as a “negative” virtue, as the negation, namely, of a number of related vices: domination, hyper-autonomy, arrogance, presumption, vanity, pretentiousness, snobbery, self-righteousness, invidious pride, and envy. But we now understand ‘negative’ differently. The earlier account was too Aristotelian in describing in quantitative terms these kinds of unhumility, which we now call the vices of pride or self-importance: earlier we say that vanity is an “excessive” concern to be well regarded (p. 259), pretentiousness is a disposition to claim “higher” dignity or merit than one possesses (p. 258), and so forth. On that account, the negation would be a lowering of the concern, the claim, etc. Thus, some have named our view the “low concern” account of humility.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the current account might be called a no concern account, or an absence or emptiness account; thus it’s more radically “negative.” To have perfect virtuous humility is to lack the concern characteristic of the vices of pride, along with the

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<sup>2</sup> In Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, editors, *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 257–279. A revised and expanded version was published as chapter 9 in our book, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 236–256.

<sup>3</sup> See Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Intellectual Humility: Owing Our Limitations,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2015.

understanding of self and other that that concern involves. In the earlier account, we didn't try to specify what all the vices of pride have in common such that makes them vices of pride. But now we do, and we call that object of concern *self-importance*. We contrast that degenerate concern with a different concern for personal importance that is proper and healthy, which we call *importance as a person*. The distinction between these two kinds of object of concern permits us to say that humility is the complete absence of the concern for self-importance. Complete humility is a perfect "purity of heart," where what the heart is pure *of* is the concerns and modes of self-understanding that belong to the vices of pride. Perfection in this regard is an extremely high ideal, so high that it seems unlikely that any mere human has ever attained it, at least in this current life that is so beset with encouragements, both biological and social-structural, to think and desire in the terms characteristic of the vices of pride. So in ordinary contexts of assessing us flawed human beings, we may say that someone has the virtue of humility even if she isn't perfect in this regard. In this way, the current account is, after all, a low concern account.

Another advantage of identifying more precisely the object of the concerns of vicious pride is that it allows us to categorize these vices according to how the object of concern is conceived or construed, especially in its understanding of how self-importance is possessed or to be pursued. Concerns, even the most rudimentary, contain within them an understanding of their object. You can't be concerned for or care about something unless you understand it in one way or another, correctly or incorrectly, and you are concerned about it *as* you understand it. For example, the concern that constitutes snobbery is a concern for belonging to some elite, and it involves a ramified understanding of what counts as an elite and what it is to belong to it and that it is important to belong to elites because so belonging lends importance to oneself. Thus the current account has resources for connecting humility quite directly to understanding, especially the understanding that is practical wisdom (or its complement, practical foolishness). The vices of pride carry with them their own special brand of practical foolishness, so one epistemic beauty of humility, on the purity view, is that it constitutes a large void in the subject's practical foolishness. That is certainly a big step towards practical wisdom, even if it's only "negative" — by way of an absence of, or freedom from, a source of error. Our earlier account connected humility with the epistemic goods of truth, justification, and warrant, but not so much with understanding, and so was less explicit about humility's contribution to wisdom.

The earlier paper didn't clearly distinguish the ultimate object of the vices of pride, which we are here calling self-importance, from the mediators by which persons with these vices seek and/or possess self-importance. For example, we described the humility that corresponds to vanity as a "low concern for the kind of status that accrues to persons" (271) with certain achievements. But people may seek status for a variety of reasons (for example, to win an election, to get a job by which to support their families or do work that interests them intrinsically), and certainly not always out of vanity. So we have sought here to identify the defining object of the vices of pride, and to distinguish it from the various ways in which the possessor of the vice mediates or seeks to mediate that object to herself. In section 3 we will briefly sketch the general epistemic good of

understanding, but before we do that we must clarify a little bit the notion of self-importance that is crucial to our account of humility.

## *2. The “value” of self-importance*

We use the expression ‘self-importance’ in a special sense: to designate the kind of importance that people are seeking for themselves or attributing to themselves insofar as they exemplify the vices of pride in thought, feeling, and action. In ordinary English, when we say that a person is self-important, we mean that he is conceited, that is, that he takes himself to have the kind of importance as a person that one gains by being equal or superior to others in his comparison class for achievements, skills, honors, rank, roles, privileges, power over others, and worthiness of attentive applause and adulation and fear and envy by others. These are some of the kinds of things that mediate self-importance to a person; they are not themselves this kind of importance, but the vehicles, the carriers, of it to persons who possess them. So we aren’t using the expression the way ordinary English does, as a synonym for conceit, but as a term for the kind of value that the conceited person thinks he has, the envious person wishes he had and resents somebody else for having, the arrogant person thinks he gets from his entitlements, the vain person feels he has when people admire, applaud, fear, or envy him, the bully thinks he can get from pushing people around, and so forth. Presumably, persons of these vicious types are not seeking to be conceited.

It goes without saying, perhaps, that the “value” of self-importance is not a real value, but a pseudo-value, the pursuit and valuing of which is misunderstanding of human existence and foolishness about what is really humanly valuable. Our concept of self-importance should become clearer in section 5, where we give more detail about the understanding of life that belongs to envy, vanity, arrogance, invidious pride, bullying, hyper-autonomy, snobbery, pretentiousness, and self-righteousness. What is understanding, after all?

## *3. Understanding as we understand it*

It is a consensus among epistemologists that understanding is a synthetic mental operation or state, an operation or family of operations or family of abilities to operate that integrates two or more things, bringing them together in some kind of sense-making unity. It may be episodic (flashes or dawnings of insight, say, in which one thing is seen to be explained by another, or where some analogical relation is noticed, or where one element in a situation is meaningfully linked to another) or dispositional (we understand many things without occurrently contemplating them in the terms that we might, were we now to consider them. For example, someone understands a novel, though he is not currently reading it or thinking about it; to say that he understands it is to say that, if called upon, he can, to some degree, connect the episodes and characters in various sense-making ways). Understanding may be highly sophisticated (only specialists understand how a computer chip works) while others are “common knowledge” (three-year-olds understand much of their native language, and that stirring some liquids together tends to homogenize them). Most understanding is associated in some way or other with practice, and may be more or less embedded in and inseparable from practice.

Many people understand English in the sense that they can carry on a conversation in it and flag grammatical infelicities in others' speech; but few have a technical understanding of it that would allow them to formulate the rules that govern the connections between the vocabulary items that make up an English sentence.

Much understanding is embedded in perception. A chart may represent relationships among data sets, and the visual understanding of the chart is the use of the chart to "see" the relations among the data sets, which may not be visual data at all. Most people's understanding of a piece of music is tied to their hearing it performed, and even the thoroughly trained musician who can understand a musical score without hearing any physical sounds, will probably have to "hear" the piece in her imagination to understand it in the occurrent sense. The parts of the music (occurrences of a theme, different themes, harmonizations, rhythmic figures, etc.) are "put together" aurally in such a way as to make musical sense of them. This aural sense-making putting-together of elements is strongly analogous to the visual putting-together of the elements of a gestalt drawing that may be hard to make sense of at first, and when it is made sense of, is understood visually.

Understanding can be successful or unsuccessful. Of unsuccessful understandings (ones that are in one sense failures to understand because they are failures to get the object right), we say, "Well, I see I was wrong, but that was my understanding." We tend to use the indefinite article, thus suggesting the possibility of plural and even inconsistent understandings of the same thing, to describe understanding that may not get the object right. We say, "he doesn't understand, because he has an incorrect understanding" and "Muslims understand the relation between Islam and Christianity differently from Christians."

Evaluative understanding — understanding in which evaluative correctness is necessary for success in understanding — requires the special kind of perception that emotions are.<sup>4</sup> For example, consider the evaluative perception of a newborn's state of health. That perception is a gestalt of the various factors indicating health: skin color, ease of breathing, reactivity, muscle tone, and so forth down the list for Apgar scoring. Perhaps we can imagine a nurse or doctor who construes the baby in terms of the Apgar markers (and thus has a kind of perceptual understanding of the baby's health), but does so with utter dispassion. Since health is a good (even a great good), something is missing from this doctor's construal of the baby's condition. In not feeling joy or distress about the baby's condition, as warranted by the baby's Apgar score, the doctor is missing the "human" element, the personal significance of the baby's condition. No doubt the doctor has some understanding, but from the "human" point of view that understanding is crucially incomplete.

Summarizing the foregoing, we see that understanding is synthetic, dispositional or episodic, specialized or common, explicit or implicit, that it often bears on practice, that it

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, chapters 3–5.

can take perceptual form, can be successful or unsuccessful, and that success in understanding can depend on right emotion.

All the above points about understanding are important for making clear how understanding is affected by humility and the vices that are contrary to it. Since humility is an absence, the understanding that we must examine first, so as to understand what kind of absence humility is and how that absence bears on understanding of the “world,” is the vices of pride, because they are what humility is an absence of. The understanding characteristic of the vices of pride is a construal of the subject’s self in terms of the way its current situation bears on its concern for self-importance. These vices are more or less entrenched dispositions to understand situations as they bear on one’s self-importance, but when those situations are salient to the possessor of the vice, they yield episodes of such understanding. These ways of understanding situations require no specialized education, though they are to some extent products of education, being nurtured by the ways of the subject’s social world: the pervasive grading of persons in the dimensions of excellence, the institutions that incorporate competition and rivalry, the unequal distribution of power and entitlements, the institutions of “performance” in which the differentiating excellences (power, beauty, skills) are displayed before others, the use of one’s own “tribe” as a criterion of the worth of persons, and perhaps in other ways. Episodes of such understandings can be explicit, even explicitly expressed in language, but they can also be implicit, emerging in behavior, virtually without the awareness of the subject or, if the subject is sophisticated, with the uneasy quasi-unawareness of self-deception.<sup>5</sup> The ways of understanding the world characteristic of the vices of pride bear on practice: envy, arrogance, vanity, domination, and the rest all have characteristic actions and ways of interacting socially. These actions and interactions are motivated by the way the situation appears to (is “seen by”) the subject, and the appearance (insight, understanding) is always unsuccessful as a representation of the situation. And we think that in such motivated, practical, contexts, the subject’s correct understanding of the situation depends on her feeling the right emotion. It follows that the vices of pride are distortions of understanding of the situation they are about. Humility, as an absence of the vices of pride, is an absence of the distorted understandings that exemplify them.

In section 5 we will put flesh on these rather abstract claims. But before we do that, it will be handy to place before our minds a virtue that is unlike humility, in that it embodies a positive understanding of the situations to which it is relevant, and tends to generate successful ones. This contrasting case will throw light on the peculiarities of humility as a virtue.

#### *4. Practical understanding constitutive of justice*

Long ago Roberts proposed to call certain virtues “substantive and motivational”<sup>6</sup> because they reflect moral thought and supply motivation to their possessor, and stand in contrast, in these ways, to other virtues such as courage and self-control (we might now

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<sup>5</sup> This could be fruitfully developed.

<sup>6</sup> “Will Power and the Virtues, *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 227–247.

add humility, though it is not characterized, as are the virtues Roberts mentioned in that paper, by “willpower”). The just person, for example, is someone who cares about justice in its various permutations — just states of affairs, just institutions, just actions, just policies and arrangements, and just people, for example. This is the family of objects for which the virtue of justice is a concern. A just person is moved by such concern — to emotions such as anger about injustices, disappointment and lament over the injustice of friends and acquaintances, joy at the rectification of injustices, admiration of just people, gratitude to people who promote justice, and so forth, as well as to just actions. But this concern, and consequently the emotions that are based on it and the actions that it motivates, need to be morally intelligent. The just person needs to be someone who thinks well, even deeply, about matters of justice and injustice. She needs to have a reliable nose for justice and injustice, even in places where many would not notice them. She needs to be a person who notices where injustice is likely to be in the offing, where a social arrangement, for example, is of a kind likely to breed injustices. She needs to have insight into human motives that are prone to tempt to injustice. She needs to understand the psychology of oppression and domination (some of the vices of pride) and the human need for freedom. She needs to have a refined conception of human rights. As Aristotle notes, a disposition to choose well requires an integration of right thinking and right desiring.<sup>7</sup> On the view presented here (as, we think, on Aristotle’s), in practical understanding the desiring aspect (we have spoken of concern) is just as crucial as the thinking aspect — and, as we noted earlier, concerns entail some understanding. In ethics, a person who is not properly concerned will also not be wise; that is, he will fall short in ethical understanding.

We are proposing that, in contrast with the virtues of justice and truthfulness, the virtue of humility is not based on a concern for a family of objects (say, for lowliness in its various permutations — lowly people, lowly actions, low social status, insignificant institutions, humility itself as a character trait,<sup>8</sup> and low ambition — combined with right thinking about such objects). Instead, it is an absence, a freedom, a purity — namely, a freedom or purity from the concerns and ways of thinking of the vices of pride. You could also say that it’s a blindness to the kinds of things that the vices of pride “see”: false entitlements, opportunities to put down a rival who seems to be succeeding in a contest for personal importance, the beauty of a colleague’s moral inferiority, or of an acquaintance’s social class. Let us turn now to a somewhat more detailed look at those concerns and ways of thinking.

##### *5. Understandings of self and other in the vices of pride*

We propose to divide the chief vices of pride into five classes:

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<sup>7</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 6, chapter 2, 1139a23–26.

<sup>8</sup> Might address the objection that perhaps humility is just a love of humility as a character trait, the virtue of the person who sees humility as a virtue and pursues it as such. Humility is interest in being humble. What’s wrong with this idea?

- 1) *The prides of distorted agency* (selfish ambition, domination, and hyper-autonomy);
- 2) *The prides of empty self-display* (vanity and pretentiousness);
- 3) *The pride of corrupt entitlement* (arrogance);
- 4) *The prides of invidious comparison* (snobbery, self-righteousness, invidious pride, and envy);
- 5) *The prides of tribal superiority* (racism, sexism, ethnicism, homophobia, etc.).

The elements of vice in these five types of vicious pride seem to us to harbor the most important aspects of the pseudo-value that we are calling self-importance. Reflection on them should clarify our proposed distinction between self-importance and importance as a person. We'll see that these elements are interwoven, and belong to and qualify one another, forming elements of a mosaic that together depict the "value" of self-importance. For economy of words, we will take as illustrative the prides of distorted agency, but preface that discussion by surveying the kinds of vicious pride. All of the prides are misconceptions or misuses of basic facts about or features of human nature.

The prides of distorted agency misconceive and misuse basic human nature as agentic — the fact that we are doers of actions. This statement will suffice for now, since we will explain the point in some detail in section 6.

The prides of empty self-display trade on the fact that we are more or less constantly in the view of others, and that as a matter of equilibrium and wellbeing we depend on others for respect and love. We distort this aspect of our nature when we seek to "impress" others by displaying our admirable qualities just for the satisfaction of being adulated or admired. This seeking is empty or vain in two ways: 1) it is for no warrantable social purpose, but simply for self-exaltation, and 2) it misses the point of the basic disposition; adulation is no substitute for respect and love, and so fails really to exalt or satisfy the person.

The pride of corrupt entitlement is displayed most graphically where high entitlement claims are unwarranted, because this tends to show them to have, as either their origin or their aim, the claimant's social importance, and social importance is one of the things the vices of empty self-display typically seek to display about oneself, so as to garner self-importance. But there is also a secret kind of arrogance that makes no exaggerated entitlement claim, but whose claim still has the substantive significance for the claimant of boosting his importance in the eyes of others and thus in his own eyes. The claim often has a comparative import: one gets more self-importance, on this understanding, the more special or privileged the entitlements are. Though the entitlement claim is legitimate, this is still a corruption of the claim to entitlement because of the morally extraneous rationale for the claim; the reference to the eyes of others suggests a connection between the vice of corrupt entitlement and the vices of empty self-display, and the import of superiority through more privileged entitlements suggests a connection to the vices of invidious comparison.



The prides of invidious comparison assume falsely and feel emotionally that one person is more important than another because he is superior in some way — in talent, accomplishments, beauty, entitlements, discipline, wealth, education, health, moral uprightness, elite membership, and so forth. Their invidiousness is particularly apparent in the vices' enthusiasm for the other's inferiority to oneself, which may manifest itself either in gladness about the other's inferiority or distress about one's own.

The prides of tribal superiority turn on the fact that human beings come in a variety of races, cultures, genders, etc. with which people strongly group-identify. They resemble those of invidious comparison in that both involve comparison that is invidious. But they seem to constitute a distinct sub-class in making the self a we-self. Tribe membership is not a warrant for the feeling of individual, but of group, superiority. Snobbery, being a kind of elitism, also has a group reference, but tribalism doesn't necessarily suppose that the tribe is elite, only that it is the norm. We are the real humans, so to speak. Snobbish Princetonians don't deny that people from the state university are fully human, but only that they're as "special" as us.

Each of the five classes of vices seems to specialize in some one of the four features, while drawing on some of the other features for its nastiness. Each of the vices can be construed as a *concern for* — agency, entitlements, adulation, (individual or group) superiority (but not *as such*, for none of these four is a bad thing in itself); rather, for each of these things *as understood* in the way characteristic of the vice. We'll now try to illustrate such understanding — which we take to be a kind of practical foolishness — through a more sustained contemplation of the vices of distorted agency.

#### 6. *The prides of distorted agency.*

Agency is a fundamental feature of human nature: it is in the nature of human beings to perform actions. Actions are self-initiated and intentional loci of responsibility for changes in self and world. Thus we *attribute* them and their consequences to people, giving credit (a kind of acknowledging attention) for good ones and discredit (a detracting attention) for bad. The development of a person's agency and his or her understanding of it is basic to the virtues and vices. The virtuous person will act virtuously and virtuously construe his or her actions, while bad customs<sup>9</sup> of action and of construal of one's actions are features of the vices. The three prides of distorted agency — selfish ambition, domination, and hyper-autonomy — are bad customs of agency and of self-construal of agency.

All of the vices of pride aim penultimately at what we call the vehicles of self-importance and ultimately at self-importance itself. The vehicles (e.g. human agency, gender differentiation) aren't vicious in themselves, but only in the "usage" of the vices, which conceive them viciously, as ways of getting to self-importance. The vehicles of the three

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<sup>9</sup> The word *custom* here is meant to suggest something like Aristotle's word *êthos* (see *NE* 2.1), a word often somewhat misleadingly translated as *habit*. *Custom* picks up the social ring of Aristotle's word and doesn't suggest blind automaticity, as *habit* may.

vices we'll now expound all have to do with agency, each in a different aspect. The vehicle of selfish ambition is *achievement*, that of domination is *control of other agents*, and that of hyper-autonomy is *independence of agency*.

### Selfish ambition

Let's say that ambition, as trait-like, is a steady purpose to accomplish something well, and that virtuous ambition is a steady purpose to accomplish well something genuinely good as an end in itself. In accomplishing well something good, a person realizes an end of his essential agency, and thus lends weight or genuine importance to himself as a person. He may be aware of this (potential) weight-gain, either retrospectively or prospectively, and it may then be part of his ambition, though as ambition matures, explicit attention to self as having the importance of personal gravity diminishes; maturely ambitious persons think of what they're about far more than they think of their importance as persons. In mature persons, the sense of accomplishment, or of its potential, is not thematic, but gets quietly embedded in one's style of acting (self-confidence, secure sense of agency). If a person falsely understands his weight-gain as an increase in *self*-importance, in his ability to throw his weight around and his invidious superiority to others, his ambition becomes to that extent "selfish" and vicious. Any action that is understood as achieving self-importance as a good is an unsuccessful case of understanding, an instance of practical foolishness. So ambition, the purpose to accomplish something well, can aim at either self-importance or genuine good, the aiming is a kind of understanding, and aiming at self-importance is a misunderstanding and practical foolishness. To reinforce this point, let's think for a moment about accomplishment.

What is accomplishment? The value of actions and their accomplishment is not exhausted in the value of their outcomes. Actions aim at goods in such a way that they can be polluted or compromised by the introduction of extraneous purposes (ulterior motives). An act of friendship will be disappointing if its ultimate aim turns out to be mercenary, and even if such an aim is secondary. If a person undertakes an action or series of actions to understand humility, then her ultimate aim ought to be to understand humility or, more broadly, increase in wisdom, and if her aim turns out to be to build her reputation as a philosopher, the motive seems similarly to spoil the action, especially if she understands the ultimate aim of enhancing her reputation to be her self-importance. And this will be so even if, by the way, she would also like to understand humility. The potential for such pollution will depend on what the action is. If your action is to produce labels for canned goods, you won't be faulted for doing so to make money.<sup>10</sup> So in the case of actions for high purposes, agency can be demoted or polluted by ulterior motives. Self-importance is such a motive.

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<sup>10</sup> But just as it's hard to see how making money, as an ultimate aim for one's agency, lends any serious human importance to one's person, it's hard to see how making labels for canned goods, as an end in itself, could do so.

But what about personal importance — is *it* an extraneous motive? No, it seems appropriate for a being who is essentially an agent to be interested, not just in good ends, but in being the agent of their accomplishment. This is not to deny that, in certain circumstances, it may be virtuously generous, even heroically so, to cede to another the opportunity to accomplish some great end that one might have accomplished oneself; it is just to assert that it is perfectly appropriate, not viciously selfish, for a person to wish to be, himself, the one who accomplishes that end. Sydney Carton, in *A Tale of Two Cities* (Book 3, chapters 13–15), doesn't just want somebody to be substituted, on the scaffold of the guillotine, for Charles Darnay, but wants, *himself*, to perform this sacrificial act, because he wants, finally, to *be* somebody.<sup>11</sup> So ambition, in the sense of wanting to *be the one who accomplishes* something good, rather than merely that something good *should be accomplished*, seems appropriate and virtuous. The interest in being the agent of one's actions, then, doesn't seem to be extraneous to the actions in a way that compromises agency.

The “sense of accomplishment” (a satisfaction in what I have achieved) is an emotion that could be called a “feeling of pride” and may be a manifestation of a virtuous pride. I say, “may be,” because the difference between virtuous and vicious will depend on what else in this emotion, this sense of satisfaction — what is the source of or reason for this satisfaction. If the satisfaction is *in having greater self-importance than someone else* in virtue of this accomplishment, the pride will be a manifestation of selfish ambition. If the satisfaction is *in the (my) accomplishment*, then while this is a manifestation of pride, it is not vicious, but virtuous and expresses wisdom. This pride, as approving awareness of virtue in myself, enhances my excellence as a person and thus my personal importance. The emotion of pride in accomplishments embodies an understanding of the accomplishment and the self; if that understanding is virtuous ambition, then it is a true evaluative (practical) understanding of oneself and the accomplishment, and manifests practical wisdom; if, on the other hand, it is selfish ambition, then it is a false understanding of oneself and the accomplishment, and manifests practical foolishness.

In judging whether ambition in any instance is selfish or virtuous, we must think developmentally. A self-focus that may be appropriate in youth or at a turning point of development of character may be inappropriate in later circumstances. Young ambition is of necessity somewhat abstract: the young person wants to do something great, to make a name for herself, but doesn't know yet what she wants to do, and so cannot have that substantive commitment to duty or beauty or service of humanity that may have the power to purge the older woman's ambition of whatever of selfishness it may contain. In his first bid for public office, when he was 23, Abraham Lincoln campaigned on the

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<sup>11</sup> Carton's final speech, as imagined post-execution by the narrative voice, is very self-focused, but it is equally and generously focused on the happiness of the Darnay family that his act has enabled. This kind of self-focus is appropriate and virtuous because of the momentousness of the action and Carton's developmental situation. This is a dramatic moment, a turning point, in his life (to put it mildly), so what we say of the ambitious young person is true of Carton, even if he isn't terribly young.

platform of improving the navigability of the Sangamon River, framing a law limiting the rates of usury, and the support of education. He ended by saying,

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed (<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/1832.htm>).

Lincoln, who by all accounts was very ambitious, wanted to do *something* that would merit the accurate esteem of his fellow human beings. Most would agree that he fulfilled this ambition spectacularly, history providing the context for the great works that would crown his ambition. The vilification and virulent disesteem that he patiently and good-naturedly endured during his presidency as he carefully pursued the infinitely ramified good of preserving the Union suggests that the accent in this early formulation of his ambition should fall on ‘worthy’ rather more than on ‘esteem of my fellow men.’ But we can tell that, of course, only by retrospection. The other reason our thinking about self-focus in virtuous ambition needs to be developmental is that greater self-focus is more properly in order in youth and at turning points in development than at the time of ambition’s maturity. The Sydney Carton example illustrates this point. Also, Lincoln seems to have been remarkably little focused on himself or his reputation as he pursued what one biographer calls “the duty of a statesman.”<sup>12</sup>

The difference between selfish and virtuous ambition is also reflected in a person’s understanding of credit. Some reasons for wanting credit for our achievements are compatible with virtuous ambition. For example, a scholar, applying for a grant, claims credit for her past scholarly achievements to support her case for being given the opportunity to do more scholarship. But people may also want credit as nourishment for their conceit and vanity. Harry Truman expressed and commended a humble kind of ambition when he pointed out, repeatedly, that you can get more accomplished if you don’t mind who gets the credit, and when he insisted that the plan to rebuild the economies of Europe after the Second World War be called the Marshall Plan after George C. Marshall rather than the Truman Plan.<sup>13</sup> Again, Truman’s attitude here shows a wise understanding of his own agency in relation to the world. It is an understanding that reflects justice, and perhaps generosity, and is enabled by a certain absence of selfish ambition, with its aspects of vanity and hyper-autonomy in the hunger for credit. That absence is what we call humility.

### Domination

A second vice of pride that turns on agency is the “bullying” vice of domination. This vice, and the next one we’ll consider — hyper-autonomy — turn on the deep fact of

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<sup>12</sup> William Lee Miller, *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p.

<sup>13</sup> *Truman*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992, p. 564.

human nature that *our agency is shared*. We never act entirely alone, and the vices of domination and hyper-autonomy are both distortions of this feature of human agency — efforts, as it were, to deny this fact, either by absorbing others' agency into one's own (domination) or by denying others' contribution to one's agency (hyper-autonomy).

The vice of domination is a concern to control others' agency so that they become “agents” of one's own agency. So it involves an understanding of others as properly subordinate to oneself, as means to one's own ends. It is thus a violation, in spirit if not in deed, of Kant's categorical imperative: Always so act that you treat others not as means only, but ends in themselves — that is, as agents in their own right.<sup>14</sup> As a failure in this regard, domination is a deep and spiritual form of disrespect, the antithesis of the humility that is manifested in respecting others as agents. It is also a deep failure to understand oneself and other people — a point we can be helped to see if we admit that understanding is not perfectly coordinated with belief. It may not be the bully's considered belief that people are nothing but his agents, but this is nevertheless how he understands these matters, at least when his vice of domination is most fully in force. The bully may seek to subsume others' agency under his own by angry tantrums when they fail to conform, or by threats intended to control them by inspiring fear. He may not even insist that they subserve his ends perfectly, if only they fear him enough to be under his influence. He wants to be present in their actions, and one way to be there is to be feared enough that they take him into consideration in what they do. It goes without saying that the concern and understanding that constitute the vice of domination need not always be successful as the domineering would count success: the concern and understanding may be manifested in their frustration when intended subordinates show insubordination. But the self-understanding of the domineering, as an understanding of who they really are and what is good for them, is *always* a misunderstanding. In their understanding of their agency, they are fools.

The vice of domination can come in widely varying degrees of gentility. A stunningly lovely, ironic depiction of the vice is Tolstoy's description of Ivan Ilyich in his new job of examining magistrate:

As examining magistrate Ivan Ilyich was just as *comme il faut* and decorous a man, inspiring general respect and capable of separating his official duties from his private life, as he had been when acting as an official on special service. His duties now as examining magistrate were far more interesting and attractive than before. In his former position it had been pleasant to wear an undress uniform made by Scharmer, and to pass through the crowd of petitioners and officials who were timorously awaiting an audience with the governor, and who **envied** him as with free and easy gait he went straight into his chief's private room to have a cup of tea and a cigarette with him. But not many people had then been **directly dependent on him** — only police officials and the sectarians when he went on special missions — and he liked to treat them politely, almost as

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<sup>14</sup> Cite the *Groundwork*.

comrades, **as if he were letting them feel that he who had the power to crush them was treating them in this simple, friendly way.** There were then but few such people. But now, as an examining magistrate, Ivan Ilyich felt that everyone without exception, even the most important and self-satisfied, was **in his power**, and that he need only write a few words on a sheet of paper with a certain heading, and this or that important, **self-satisfied person** would be brought before him in the role of an accused person or a witness, and if he did not choose to allow him to sit down, would have to stand before him and answer his questions. **Ivan Ilyich never abused his power;** he tried on the contrary to soften its expression, but the consciousness of it and the possibility of softening its effect, supplied the chief interest and attraction of his office.<sup>15</sup>

One form of humility, then, is the absence of this concern to dominate and of the understanding of self and others that is essential to it. The absence of this concern and understanding, and of the emotions of satisfaction and frustration that embody them, is a clearance of the way for such virtues as respect and justice and collegiality — some of the virtues crucial to effective leadership.<sup>16</sup>

Humility is, among other absences, the absence of domination; but it is not the absence of authoritative strength in leadership. Leadership involves the directing, and in this sense, the control, of others' agency, but it is not the misunderstanding of their agency as subsumed under one's own. It is a directing that is compatible with respect and justice and collegiality. According to William Lee Miller, Lincoln was clear, from the first day of his presidency, that his was the ultimate executive authority, and on selected occasions, according to what he judged the situation to call for, he overrode the will of his cabinet and the most powerful members of it, not to speak of the will of generals and other non-governmental authorities. But he was not under the illusion that he could "own" others' agency so as to build a personal empire of action in which others' agency was for gratifying his love of self-importance.

#### Hyper-autonomy

If domination is the concern to *co-opt* others' agency in the interest of one's self-importance, in the false understanding that doing so will give one importance as a person, hyper-autonomy is the concern to *exclude* all *dependence* on the agency of others so as to defend against having to share the credit, in the false understanding that having all the credit is a way to have personal importance. Charles Dickens depicts it in Josiah Bounderby, whom he titles "the bully of Humility": "Here I am, Mrs. Gradgrind, and nobody to thank for my being here, but myself."<sup>17</sup> Bounderby's hyper-autonomy is mingled with several other vices of pride — vanity, invidious pride, and domination.

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<sup>15</sup> *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, chapter 2, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude.

<sup>16</sup> See Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> *Hard Times*, Book I, Chapter 4.

Dickens describes Bounderby's enthusiastic understanding of his housekeeper, Mrs. Sparsit:

If Bounderby had been a Conqueror, and Mrs. Sparsit a captive Princess whom he took about as a feature in his state-processions, he could not have made a greater flourish with her than he habitually did. Just as it belonged to his boastfulness to depreciate his own extraction, so it belonged to it to exalt Mrs. Sparsit's. In the measure that he would not allow his own youth to have been attended by a single favourable circumstance, he brightened Mrs. Sparsit's juvenile career with every possible advantage, and showered waggon-loads of early roses all over that lady's path. 'And yet, Sir,' he would say, 'how does it turn out after all? Why here she is at a hundred a year (I give her a hundred, which she is pleased to term handsome), keeping the house of Josiah Bounderby of Coketown!'<sup>18</sup>

Bounderby is a caricature, of course. He is in profounder darkness about himself than most of us ordinary exemplars of the vices of pride. But the desire to free ourselves of debts to others in our actions, accomplishments, and capacities for thought and action, along with the accompanying understanding of our autonomy and auto-formation as exalting us and giving us superiority as persons, is a significant source of cognitive distortion.

The person who lacks the vice of hyper-autonomy — who is humble in this regard — is free to be rational with respect to the debts she owes to others' agency. In wise circumspection, and motivated by justice and gratitude, she will be keenly aware of and gladly acknowledge her debts to others for their contributions to her projects, her abilities, and her virtues. She'll be free from the illusion that her integrity and importance as a person increases in the degree to which she is socially debt-free.

### 7. *Virtue individuation and interconnection*

The absence account of humility given here is an oddball in the world of scholarship on humility, whether in philosophy or psychology. Almost all accounts work within the assumption that humility is some kind of self-assessment or -perception, some kind of self-concept. Some think it's a low self-assessment<sup>19</sup>, others that it's an accurate self-assessment<sup>20</sup>, others that it's an unexaggerated self-assessment<sup>21</sup>, others that it's an

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<sup>18</sup> *Hard Times*, Book 1, chapter 7.

<sup>19</sup> See Smith, T. (1998). "The practice of pride," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998), pp. 71–90.

<sup>20</sup> See Richards, N. (1992). *Humility*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<sup>21</sup> See Flanagan, O. (1990). Virtue and ignorance. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 87(8), 420–428. <http://doi.org/10.2307/2026736>

appreciation of one's limitations<sup>22</sup>; one thinks it is a kind of ignorance of one's good qualities<sup>23</sup>; another, a little different, says it's a kind of inattention to one's good qualities.<sup>24</sup> We, on the contrary, say that it's not a self-assessment at all. It's not an assessment of (or even inattention to) anything. Instead, it's an absence — of arrogance, domination, vanity, pretentiousness, snobbery, and so forth through all the vices of pride, an absence of the concerns and shaping understandings of self and other that these vices are.

But isn't it odd to think that a *virtue* could be a complete *absence* of something? Doesn't a virtue have to be something *positive*? Doesn't it have to supply a motive and understanding of its own? How can a person exhibit instances of, or exemplify, humility — through actions and emotions — if humility is nothing but an absence? Indeed, humility has been depicted here as precisely an absence of a certain kind of motivation and thought.

Well, obviously humility can't be a contextless absence. To be a virtue, and to have exemplifications in emotion, thought, motivation, and action it will have to be an absence of something *from something* positive — a normal and virtuous person, for example! The reader will have noticed, perhaps, that when we mention exemplifications of humility in this paper, we attribute the motivation and thought that went into them to other virtues. For example, we said just above, of the person whose humility is her absence of hyper-autonomy, that

In wise circumspection, and motivated by justice and gratitude, she will be keenly aware of and gladly acknowledge her debts to others for their contributions to her projects, her abilities, and her virtues.

Humility is not the same virtue as wise circumspection, justice, and gratitude, but here the exemplification of humility is motivated, and provided with understanding of the woman's social indebtedness, by her virtues of wisdom, justice, and gratitude. Humility's contribution to this episode is the absence of the obstacle of hyper-autonomy to the exercise of the other three virtues. If she'd been hyper-autonomous like Bounderby, she would have had difficulty, at best, in summoning these other virtues for the performance, and probably would not have been able to exemplify them. Bounderby is deficient in all of those virtues because of his hyper-autonomy.

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<sup>22</sup> See Snow, N. (1995). Humility. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 9: 203–216 and Whitcomb, D., Battaly, H., Baehr, J., & Howard-Snyder, D. (2015). Intellectual humility: Owning our limitations. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, n/a–n/a. <http://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12228>.

<sup>23</sup> See Driver, J. (1989). The virtues of ignorance. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 86(7), 373–384, (2000) and *Uneasy virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>24</sup> See Bommarito, N. (2013). Modesty as a virtue of attention. *Philosophical Review* 122, 93–117. <http://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-1728723>.



So normally, the background against which humility is a peculiar absence is the substantive and motivational virtues such as justice, generosity, gratitude, truthfulness, and compassion, the thoughts characteristic of these virtues being a large part of practical wisdom. When humility the virtue is exemplified in episodes of humility (what psychologists of humility call “state humility”<sup>25</sup>), these will be episodes of emotion or action. We mean to include in “episodes of emotion or action” episodes in which it would be typical for human beings to exhibit a vice of pride in emotion or action, but that episode is strikingly absent. The episode then has a contrary-to-fact conditional character. When an actual emotion or action expresses humility, however, that emotion or action will exemplify one or many of the other virtues. Our thesis is that there are no emotions, thoughts, or actions that are characteristic of humility *as such*, independently of motivation from some other quarter. That’s an implication of the view that humility is an absence.

#### *8. Understandings external to humility that are affected by it*

The majority of this paper has been about the understanding of self and other that the humble person as such has, and our thesis has been there is no such thing, but rather that humility implies not *mis*understanding oneself in relation to others in the ways characteristic of the vices of pride. But this is not the only way that humility affects understanding. We’ll briefly comment on two other kinds of understanding that the virtue helps to enable. One is understanding of matters not necessarily about self and others, and the other in a kind of external understanding of the other.

In “Humility and Epistemic Goods” we pointed out how a philosopher’s vanity might discourage him from adjusting his philosophical claims once he has made them public. Thus vanity could block a line of inquiry that might lead to deeper philosophical understanding of the nature of truth, for example. We note how a scientist’s arrogance can put off authorities or colleagues who are in a position to block the scientist’s access to the wherewithal for further research, thus diminishing her chances of understanding something. These are not cases of understanding of self and other such as we have been examining in this paper, but they are kinds of understanding for which the road might be unblocked for someone who lacked vanity and arrogance.

A kind of understanding that seems to be related to humility and the virtues of pride, without being either the kind internal to the vices of pride or that internal to the virtues that are enabled by humility is the cool, empathic humble understanding of the dynamics of the vices of pride. Lincoln was the object of repeated acts of arrogant insolence and

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Don E. Davis, Joshua N. Hook, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Daryl R. van Tongeren, Aubrey L. Gartner, David J. Jennings II, and Robert A. Emmons, “Relational Humility: Conceptualizing and Measuring Humility as a Personality Judgment,” *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 93(3) (2011), 225–234, and Elliott Kruse, Joseph Chancellor, Peter M. Ruberton, and Sonja Lyubomirsky, “An Upward Spiral Between Gratitude and Humility,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* DOI: 10.1177/1948550614534700spps.sagepub.com.

condescension by General George McClellan, and through it all apparently never reacted in vengeful indignation, as almost anybody else would, but instead was generously forgiving, expressing also a virtue of pride that we might call “entitlement serenity,” a confident sense of his own dignity that enabled him selectively not to insist even on his legitimate entitlements.<sup>26</sup> Lincoln seemed to understand very well how McClellan’s arrogance worked, but this was not the understanding internal to arrogance. An important part of his extraordinary skill as a statesman depended on his ability to anticipate the reactions of others, many of which would be motivated by the concerns and understanding characteristic of the vices of pride. But perhaps Lincoln’s humility enabled him to have this cooler, wise and objective understanding of arrogance and the other vices of pride, instead of the treacherous concerned kind internal to them.

### 9. Conclusion

We’ve argued that the virtue of humility, being an absence of the vices of pride, is also an absence of the concerned understanding characteristic of those vices, and that that absence leaves the way clear for the substantive and motivational virtues and the understandings that are internal to them. The understandings characteristic of the vices of pride are all misunderstandings of the nature of self and other in relation and of the self’s good. Thus humility provides human beings a fundamentally important epistemic benefit.

#### APPENDIX: The Vices’ Guiding Evaluative Thoughts (Understandings)

##### 1) *The prides of distorted agency (selfish ambition, domination, and hyper-autonomy);*

Selfish ambition: *I can make myself important as a person by achieving accomplishments that will arouse people’s admiration, applause, and envy because they are greater than the accomplishments of others.*

Domination: *I make myself important as a person by controlling others’ actions and emotions, so that they become extensions of my agency.*

Hyper-autonomy: *I am the more important as a person, the fewer people I depend on for what I am and do.*

##### 2) *The prides of empty self-display (vanity and pretentiousness);*

Vanity: *I am important as a person to the extent that people admire, applaud, and envy me.*

Pretentiousness: *I make myself important as a person by displaying myself so that people admire, applaud, and envy me.*

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<sup>26</sup> See “Jesus and the Virtues of Pride” by Robert Roberts and Ryan West, forthcoming in Adam Carter and Emma Gordon, editors (Routledge).

**3) *The prides of corrupt entitlement (arrogance and presumption);***

Arrogance: *I gain importance as a person by having special privileges and entitlements.*

Presumption: *I gain importance as a person by having special privileges and entitlements.*<sup>27</sup>

**4) *The prides of invidious comparison (snobbery, self-righteousness, invidious pride, and envy).***

Snobbery: *I gain importance as a person by belonging to elite (superior) classes or groups.*

Self-righteousness: *I have importance as a person to the extent that I am morally better than someone.*

Invidious pride: *I am important as a person in inverse proportion to other people's lesser importance as persons.*

Envy: *I am unimportant as a person in inverse proportion to other people's greater importance as persons.*

**THESIS: A person has the virtue of humility if and only if, or to the extent that, he doesn't think of himself (in the relevant concerned way<sup>28</sup>) in any of the above terms.**

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<sup>27</sup> These two vices seem to have the same understanding of self-value. Both of them suggest the illegitimacy of the privilege- or entitlement-claim, but that will not be part of the self-*understanding* of the arrogant and presumptuous person.

<sup>28</sup> The concern being the concern for importance as a person conceived in the manner of the vices of pride.