Humility’s Independence

**Please cite the published version:**

Hughes, Derick. 2023. “Humility’s Independence.” *Philosophia*.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-023-00682-5>.

**Abstract**

Philosophers often claim that humility is a dependent virtue: a virtue that depends on another virtue for its value. I consider three views about this relation: *Specific Dependence*, *Unspecific Dependence*, and *Fittingness*. I argue that, since humility cannot *uniquely* depend on another virtue, and since this uniqueness is desirable, we should reject *Specific* and *Unspecific Dependence*. I defend a *Fittingness* view, according to which the humble person possesses some objectively good quality fitting for humility. I show beyond Slote’s original characterization of the dependence relation that, even if humility’s value depends on having objectively good qualities, humility itself can be one such quality. So, humility can depend on itself. I call this view *Bootstrapped Fittingness*.

**Keywords**

Humility, modesty, dependence, fittingness, meaning, bootstrapping

Humility’s Independence

1. **Introduction**

Many philosophers claim that humility is a dependent virtue (Slote 1983, chap. 3; Driver 1989, 379; Statman 1992, 425; Bommarito 2013, 94).[[1]](#footnote-1) Slote (1983, 61) introduces and describes dependent virtues as virtues that “only count as such when they are attended by other virtues.” For example, consider a prosecutor high in conscientiousness who files strict charges against minors or non-violent offenders because they are motivated to act in precise accordance with the law.[[2]](#footnote-2) We should think that the prosecutor’s conscientiousness is not virtuous because they are being legally scrupulous at the expense of being morally decent. According to Slote, this shows that conscientiousness is a dependent virtue because, without decency, conscientiousness cannot be *fully* virtuous. From this example, we can define dependent virtues as follows:

*Dependence*: *V* is a dependent virtue just in case one fully possesses *V* only if one

possesses another virtue *W*.

Furthermore, according to Slote (1983, 63), *Dependence* can take one of two forms: (1) a *Specific Dependence* claim that the dependent virtue’s value depends on a particular virtue, and (2) an *Unspecific Dependence* claim that the dependent virtue owes its value to some other virtue, but no virtue in particular. In the above example of the scrupulous prosecutor, Slote describes conscientiousness as *Specifically Dependent* because it requires that one possess decency in particular. Humility, however, is characterized by Slote as *Unspecifically Dependent*. To illustrate, Slote considers a person whose personal qualities may not be particularly admirable, but who does not overestimate their own worth. We can imagine an individual, say a dull celebrity-type, whose only claim to virtue is that they refrain from thinking about themselves or overindulging in their own fame and fortune. According to Slote, the disposition to merely avoid bad qualities, such as bragging, excessive attention to oneself, and improper pride, seems insufficient for virtuous humility. This would suggest that such a person cannot fully possess virtuous humility unless they have other virtues as well. This case of the dull celebrity adds weight to the intuitiveness of *Dependence* in other contexts too. Specifically, the case suggests that while most people would succumb to arrogance (such as achieving celebrity status, or perhaps more commonly, taking on leadership roles), a virtuously humble person is able to resist arrogance but *only* *because* they have some other virtues that they could be arrogant about.

Since Slote, philosophers have, without explicitly endorsing the *Specific Dependence* thesis, made numerous *Specific* *Dependence* claims about humility. For instance, humility has been said to depend on egalitarianism (Statman 1992; Ben-Ze’ev 1993; Nuyen 1998; O’Hagan 2018), kindness (Wilson 2016), self-respect (Kant [1797] 1996, 6: 434; Dillon 2015, 2020) and justice (Bloomfield 2020). Moreover, contrary to Slote, philosophers endorse something like *Dependence* only if the value-conferring property can also *individuate* humility. Given humility’s rather elusive nature, philosophers generally assume that humility’s value will depend on the property that individuates it, whatever that may be.

However, as Callahan (2021) recently argued, these views are in tension with the following desirable feature of our accounts of humility:

*Uniqueness*: Accounts of humility should identify what’s *humble* about humility, or particular to humility vs. other virtues (Callahan 2021, 624).[[3]](#footnote-3)

In this paper, I reject *Dependence* on the grounds that it cannot be reconciled with *Uniqueness*. I argue that good theories of humility would be independent—that is, they would not depend on other virtues to explain humility’s value. While I endorse the spirit of Slote’s view that the virtuously humble person often possesses other good qualities to be virtuously humble *about*, I understand this to be a *Fittingness* relation as opposed to a *Dependence* relation. To contrast with the case of conscientiousness depending on decency, merely *possessing* good qualities does not confer value to humility.

Instead, I show how humility can get value from itself. This is possible because, as I shall argue, virtuous humility concerns having the proper disposition toward things that are fit objects as opposed to having certain attitudes toward one’s worth. For instance, it seems like humility about curing cancer is fitting, while humility about completing the daily crossword puzzle is not fitting. Interestingly, following this line of reasoning leads us to the conclusion that humility may itself be a fitting object. This view is consistent with *Uniqueness*, because regardless of the truth of *Dependence*, humility does not owe its value to the possession of any good quality. But *even if* *it does* owe its value to another good quality, its value could in principle depend on itself, and even if one only possesses the virtue in part.

This paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I argue that *Specific Dependence* claims always fail to satisfy *Uniqueness*. Contrary to Slote, I think that philosophers are right to assume that humility’s value depends on the property that helps differentiate humility from other virtues. I do not claim to identify that property here. I just think that whatever that property is, it is not another virtue. In section 3, I show how *Unspecific Dependence* faces a dilemma: if *Unspecific Dependence* fails to satisfy *Uniqueness*, then it cannot explain what is particularly valuable about humility; if *Unspecific Dependence* does satisfy *Uniqueness*, then humility’s value is explained by its differentia specifica, the (specific) property that differentiates it from other virtues. On both horns of the dilemma, then, *Unspecific Dependence* turns out to be an uninformative relation.

What I will ultimately show, in section 4, is that Slote’s view is best interpreted as a *Fittingness* claim, according to which one can be virtuously humble *about* some good quality of objective worth. Whereas Slote (1983, 62) attempts to explain how humility “attains its full status as a virtue,” by depending on another *virtue*, I argue that humility owes none of its value to the possession of another virtue. Rather, virtuous humility is about other (non-virtuous, but) objective goods. One is virtuously humble about one’s objectively good qualities, but it is the humble *disposition* toward those qualities that is value-conferring. This is demonstrated by the following argument: even if we assume that one’s good qualities confer value to humility, humility’s value can be grounded upon being humble about one’s own humility. I call this view *Bootstrapped Fittingness*. The upshot of this view, I suggest, is that those with high achievements can be as humble as those with comparably low achievements, so long as the good object is fitting. A humble disposition can be its own fitting quality, or so I will argue.

1. **Specific Dependence**

The aim of this section is to reject *Specific* *Dependence*. While I cannot address all theories of humility that make *Specific* *Dependence* claims, I will argue that such claims are misguided because *Specific Dependence* violates *Uniqueness*. I will endeavor to show this in the context of a discussion of two virtues that philosophers have claimed humility specifically depends on: sincerity and justice.

Importantly, I will not defend *Uniqueness* here. I assume, along with philosophers who have written on humility recently, that the property that individuates humility is the same one that confers value upon it. Strictly speaking, however, Slote openly rejects this assumption since he describes *Dependence* as a value-conferring relation as opposed to a metaphysical one.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Be that as it may, there are two reasons to think that humility will be valuable because of the property that differentiates it. First, Slote takes it for granted that humility is a neutral character trait that prevents us from being arrogant or vain. But unlike the dependent virtue of conscientiousness, which Slote also takes to be a morally neutral character trait, humility is almost always taken to be non-neutral on its face.[[5]](#footnote-5) Historically, philosophers have characterized humility as a negative trait because it seems to involve lowliness or timidity (e.g., Aristotle 2009, 1125a33; Nietzsche 1887 [2006], 26–7). Contemporary philosophers overwhelmingly take humility to be a positive character trait involving, for instance, proper attitudes toward our worth that correct arrogance and vanity. In contrast to neutral character traits, such as conscientiousness or shyness, humility’s value seems to depend considerably on how it is individuated.

Second, humility is peculiar in that it defies explanation by traditional virtue theory. For instance, Bommarito (2013) suggests that modesty is to be understood in terms of attentional patterns, valuable without overt behavior. Driver (1989; 2001) argues that modesty requires ignorance, and for this reason, we must reject knowledge and practical wisdom as necessary for virtue. *Uniqueness*, and the assumption that humility’s value will be conferred by its individuating property, are important precisely because humility’s individuating properties are more elusive than Slote’s characterization of humility as morally neutral non-arrogance.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The problem, however, is that *Specific Dependence* is incompatible with *Uniqueness*. I make this argument primarily by considering Driver’s view. Although many counterexamples to Driver’s view have been offered in the literature, I want to shed light on two unexplored issues that Driver’s view raises by considering the tension between *Dependence* and sincerity. As I explain, the first issue is that on Driver’s interpretation, sincerity is at best an executive virtue, which by itself cannot impart value to humility. The second issue is that there is no non-question begging way in which humility can be said to depend on a more substantive description of sincerity, such as honesty or self-respect. I will confront this second issue by considering the view of humility as self-respect recently articulated by Dillon (2015; 2020) in an analysis of Kant.

Driver (1989, 376) holds that ignorance is necessary for genuine modesty. Unlike some others, though, I interpret this ignorance as a kind of virtuous sincerity. This helps make Driver’s *Specific Dependence* claim slightly closer to some others in the literature.[[7]](#footnote-7) Sincerity generally refers to being authentic or true to oneself and others. For Driver, the modest person sincerely underestimates their worth. This sincerity, in the form of ignorance of one’s worth, performs a similar role for modesty by helping the humble person avoid taking stances about their worth that they do not genuinely endorse. To be sure, it seems right to say that the humble person would not be motivated to deceive others into thinking that they are something that they are not; virtuous people don’t just *pretend* to be modest without really having modest attitudes.

However, if sincerity merely functions in a way that does not obstruct our possession or cultivation of humility, it cannot be said to be a virtue that humility depends on for its value. For sincerity to be the virtue that humility depends on, we would at least expect it to *actively facilitate* our possession of humility, lest we succumb to Slote’s characterization of humility as morally neutral non-arrogance. Williams (1981, 49) refers to these kinds of facilitating virtues as “executive virtues.” Executive virtues, such as integrity and self-control, are sometimes referred to as virtues of the will because of their role in promoting more substantive virtues, such as generosity and kindness.

But, if sincerity plays this executive role, then humility cannot specifically depend on it. For instance, one can be sincerely evil, and such a person’s sincerity may do nothing to offset their evilness relative to a liar or manipulator; regardless of whether morally good ends are necessary for moral virtue, this possibility illustrates a case in which sincerity would fail to impart value to its possessor. Thus, if humility depends on sincerity, and humility is a virtue, then the humble person must already be good in some other way. Some characteristically humble ends may include, for instance, making others feel respected and appreciated, adequately estimating one’s worth in relation to others, and taking responsibility for one’s mistakes and shortcomings. These ends seem indicative of humility, yet morally valuable independent of sincerity.

Many have pointed out that Driver’s account is problematic because there are cases in which modesty does not require ignorance.[[8]](#footnote-8) Still, it is also worth showing that the relevant kind of sincerity that facilitates modesty does not require ignorance either. For example, suppose that a competitive runner, Bruno, underestimates his running ability prior to his big race. Bruno secures third place in the race and accurately thinks to himself, “I’m better than I thought.” When congratulated about placing third, Bruno says, “I was surprised I came in third, but I have a long way to go if I want to secure first place.” It does not seem right to say that, once Bruno acquires some additional evidence about his running talent, he is bound to thereby lose his modesty. This is because his reply focuses on his room for improvement, and part of this involves properly judging that he has got a way to go before being good enough to achieve first place. This would suggest that, even if modesty depends on sincerity, it is the *modesty* that makes the sincerity valuable, not the other way around. A person who acts modestly while knowing their worth full well is not, thereby, insincere: surely, there are non-ignorant sincere people who are humble.

Perhaps I am neglecting a more robust interpretation of sincerity as a variety of honesty or self-respect.[[9]](#footnote-9) These virtues are certainly substantive and have moral value independently of humility. For instance, Dillon (2015, 58) asks, “why is a low opinion of moral worth morally valuable (independently of the value of honesty)?”. To answer this question, Dillon (2020, 68) endorses the *Specific Dependence* claim that humility is an ancillary virtue that has “moral value only when it is subsumed by self-respect.” Drawing on Kant, Dillon argues that humility owes its value to what she calls agentic recognition self-respect—a variety of self-respect that involves committing oneself to live in accordance with one’s self-defining standards. Indeed, Kant declares rather strongly that all interpersonal humility is “false” because it involves a comparison which becomes competitive (Dillon 2015, 54). True humility, Kant (1996, 6: 436) says, “follows unavoidably from our sincere and exact comparison of ourselves with the moral law” and “presupposes a correct estimation of self” (Kant 1997, 27: 349). This seems to be a more elaborate view about how humility specifically depends on sincerity.

In response, we should notice that Driver, and Dillon’s reading of Kant, offer quite opposite interpretations of sincerity.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is partly because Driver adopts a consequentialist view about the value of virtue, while Kant offers a deontological account of virtue. Yet, Driver and Kant make the same mistake in relying on sincerity. If we asked Driver why downplaying one’s achievements is not modest, Driver (1989, 377) would say that, at best, such modesty is “polite, or expedient, but it is not a moral virtue,” because one knows one’s worth. Likewise, Kant would describe downplaying one’s achievements as “false” humility, because sincere humility requires a correct estimation in accordance with the moral law as opposed to a comparison with others.

Both views beg the question. At some point, a proponent of *Specific Dependence* must point to what seems like an intuitive case of humility, such as Bruno’s, and claim that it is not *really* humility but a false, pretend, or merely polite version. Even if we grant the intuition that humility depends on ignorance or self-respect, when authors agree that sincerity is the virtue that humility depends on, that by itself does not yield *determinate* answers about *Specific Dependence* because the virtue that humility depends on is controversial. That is, it is typically ill-advised to attempt to resolve one controversial issue (what makes humility valuable) by relying on claims that are equally or even more controversial (what constitutes sincerity or self-respect). As greater specificity brings greater controversy in its wake, it is unlikely that we can find a virtue that parties to this debate would accept as the one humility specifically depends on for its value.

We might be able to avoid this worry if we appeal to broader or more fundamental virtues that are obviously valuable, such as justice or benevolence. However, we must still exercise caution here, since specific elaborations on these bring problems of their own. For instance, consider the following dilemma that arises from Statman’s (1992, 438) view: it seems that we should either reject modesty as a virtue altogether, or else embrace the view that humility depends on egalitarianism (roughly, equal respect for persons independently of achievement).[[11]](#footnote-11) Statman simply embraces the egalitarianism horn, yet, doing so is problematic for two reasons. First, not all failures of egalitarianism amount to failures of modesty. Second, the egalitarianism horn inevitably violates *Uniqueness*.

Consider the first point. Statman suggests that if one is modest, then one has equal respect for others as moral persons. However, failures of egalitarianism are not thereby failures of modesty. For instance, talking down to a colleague can be a failure of respect proper—it need not be immodest or arrogant disrespect since a high achieving colleague does, in fact, have more admirable qualities. Disrespect can surely occur without disparaging another person’s qualities in relation to one’s own qualities. Furthermore, it would likewise be a failure of egalitarianism to treat others as superior to oneself, but it would be odd to claim that treating others as superior amounts to a failure of modesty.

No less importantly, as mentioned above, the egalitarianism horn violates *Uniqueness*. More generally, there is a tradeoff that comes with decreasing specificity: the more general the virtue humility is said to depend on, the less we are in a position to explain what is humble about humility. The broadest interpretation of *Specific Dependence* might be Bloomfield’s (2020, 39) view that “the idea of having ‘a just opinion of ourselves’ is best captured by the virtue of justice, more so, quite arguably, than modesty (or humility).” Bloomfield arrives at this view by considering various moral exemplars, such as the Tank Man at Tiananmen Square, whose possession of humility allegedly would have prevented him from acting justly by standing in protest in front of oncoming tanks. According to Bloomfield, it seems that humility can only be valuable when accompanied by justice, but in all other circumstances it is either non-virtuous, or even vicious because of its potential to obstruct justice by making one overly submissive.

However, the claim that humility depends on justice is so broad that it is uninformative. It could be claimed that all virtues depend on justice for their value, in which case, the claim that humility is *Specifically Dependent* on justice would be of little or no consequence to humility or virtue theory. Indeed, the idea that humility depends on justice plausibly figures in long established debates about cardinality. For instance, in his description of Plato’s account of cardinality, Russell (2009, 148) says that a cardinal virtue is “a virtue to which other virtues may be subordinate but which is itself subordinate to no other virtue.”[[12]](#footnote-12) No examples of cardinal virtues are without controversy—but certainly, a subordinate non-cardinal virtue is a much more inclusive and well-defined category than *Specific Dependence*. If humility is a virtue, it is of the non-cardinal variety, since authors admit that it is a virtue that depends on context and may manifest with excesses such as self-abasement, or deficiencies such as arrogance. It does not follow from this, however, that humility depends specifically on another virtue to resolve these vices in a manner that is uniquely telling of what makes it virtuous. We might just say that humility, as well as generosity, kindness, compassion, charity, and others, are virtues because they promote justice, whatever that may be.

This is roughly the line of reasoning that I extend into the following section. I argue that there is no virtue that humility can depend on that is both unique (that is, providing meaningful information about what humility is) and unspecific in the relevant sense.

1. **Unspecific Dependence**

In this section, I aim to reject *Unspecific Dependence* claims about humility. Returning to the above example of the dull celebrity, Slote contends that humility is *Unspecifically Dependent* because it seems that for such a person to be virtuously humble, they must possess at least one other virtue. So, this view of *Unspecific Dependence* about humility requires that we share Slote’s intuition that the dull celebrity is not exhibiting full virtue when they are disposed to avoid arrogance or vanity. Let us say from this that humility is *Unspecifically Dependent* just in case it requires some other virtue, but no virtue in particular.

I will argue that *Unspecific Dependence* faces the following dilemma: on the one hand, if *Unspecific Dependence* fails to satisfy *Uniqueness*, then it cannot explain what is particularly valuable about humility because all (non-fundamental) virtues could be said to be *Unspecifically Dependent* (section 3.1). On the other hand, if *Unspecific Dependence* does satisfy *Uniqueness*, then humility’s value is explained by the property that individuates it, whatever that may be (section 3.2).

* 1. *If Not Unique, Then Uninformative*

Suppose that humility depends on some other virtue without satisfying *Uniqueness*. For instance, the *Unspecific Dependence* thesis might be developed within a unity of the virtues framework (hereafter *Unity*). *Unity* says that in order to possesses one virtue, one possesses all the virtues. Few would endorse this strong claim. Considering *Unspecific Dependence*, a more limited version of *Unity* might say that dependent virtues are domain-specific (Badhwar 1996), that they depend on cardinal virtues (Russell 2009), or that they cluster in some other way.[[13]](#footnote-13) Perhaps humility involves a *Unity*-like relation.

However, there are two related problems with formulating *Unspecific Dependence* in this way. First, all versions of *Unity* articulate a broad constraint on moral virtue. On some formulations of *Unity*, for instance, generosity may also be a case of *Dependence*, because it depends on desiring other people’s well-being. Such a broad claim significantly weakens the novelty of invoking the *Dependence* relation, particularly since philosophers generally understand *Dependence* as saying something illuminating about humility in particular. To my knowledge, *Dependence* is never invoked for other virtues.

Second, if we assume that one of these *Unity*-like constraints applies to humility, the constraint can be construed as a *Specifically Dependent* relationship; that is, it says that some virtue specifically depends on the domain it is part of. This is clearest on Wolf’s (2007) articulation of *Unity*, on which all moral virtues roughly depend on moral decency. This too undermines the novelty of the *Dependence* relation. As the paradigmatic illustration of *Dependence,* it would be uninformative for the scrupulous prosecutor’s contentiousness to depend on decency if *all* virtues require such a relation.

* 1. *If Unique, Then Independent*

For *Unspecific* *Dependence* to say something informative about what makes humility valuable, it must be both unique and unspecific. However, the *Unspecific* *Dependence* relation fails to satisfy these conditions simultaneously. The more unspecific the virtues that humility depends on—be they broad constraints such as justice or benevolence, or virtues such as generosity, kindness, and sincerity—the less informative *Dependence* is.

What seems to matter is how much we want to privilege the thought that humility is morally non-neutral on its face, and thus, how much its value stems from its individuating properties. Once we view humility as morally non-neutral, the question is not, “*how* is humility valuable” but “*why* is it (or isn’t it)”? It is this “why” question that undermines the *Dependence* relation.

For example, even Slote’s stipulation that humility is the trait that prevents the dull celebrity from arrogance or vanity can be read as morally non-neutral. Roberts’s and Wood’s (2007, chap. 9) analysis of humility, for instance, also places humility against the background of various vices including vanity and self-effacement. The vain person is overly concerned with being recognized as socially important, while the self-effacing person claims to be unworthy of praise for their successes. Humility therefore involves avoiding what these deficiencies and excesses share, which Roberts and Wood claim is a pre-occupation with oneself. The humble person is one who is unconcerned with or inattentive to their own worth. This would seem to indicate virtuousness even in the dull celebrity. To claim that their humility is not *fully* virtuous would seem to beg the question about humility’s individuating properties.

Of course, here, I am favoring the thought that if humility is morally non-neutral, it is intuitively *virtuous*. I think this because even authors such as Dillon and Bloomfield who find humility’s status as a virtue suspect, ought to agree that virtues are derivative moral properties that owe their value to being properly connected to the right and the good. What *Unspecific Dependence* attempts to do is specify the route that a virtue takes to arriving at the right and good. However, the picture that *Dependence* paints in that regard can only be so informative.

For instance, let us grant Dillon’s story that humility depends on sincerity, which depends on self-respect, which depends on one’s conformity to Kantian duty. If all virtues depend on conformity to duty, these dependence relations do not provide us with unique insight about humility’s value. One can reasonably subvert the Kantian story entirely by contending that humility depends directly on conformity to one’s duty or the right and good. We can do this, because laundry list considerations that (at least attempt to) individuate humility also apparently confer value: humility eases social tension, fosters openness, keeps one’s merits in perspective, involves acknowledging mistakes and appreciating the value of things in a larger context, and so on, and these all seem valuable in many respects. Since most contemporary philosophers share these intuitions, *Unspecific Dependence* fails to impart additional explanation about humility’s value.

*Unspecific Dependence* could be strengthened by a claim of the following sort: without the virtue that humility depends on, it could not contain an independently valuable motive that is characteristic of being humble. Continuing the Kantian line, one might argue that self-respect uniquely contains the motive of duty, while humility only helps *facilitate* one’s conformity to duty. For instance, we can grant that the above laundry list helps make humility valuable, but perhaps only because the humble person is motivated by self-respect, decency, or honesty.

This explanation, however, seems to confuse orders of judgment. As Dillon observes, the arrogant person can wrongfully take humility as an admirable quality to be proud about; imagine, for instance, a pseudo-philosopher who claims to have solved the mind-body problem, then declares that he will share his writing with the world even if the so-called “experts” will ultimately not listen to him. It seems to me that calling such a person arrogantly humble, as Dillon might be committed to saying, is misleading. The example does not show that humility fails to preclude arrogance, or that humility can only serve a facilitating role for the more fundamental virtues of self-respect, decency, or honesty. Rather, the pseudo-philosopher wrongly judges his philosophical skills to be good, when in fact they are not good (or at least not as good as he thinks). It is not a failure of self-respect *proper*, however, because the pseudo-philosopher wrongly judges that his work is good when it is not.Therefore,it seems that the relation that matters for humility concerns the humble person’s attitudes about what is *properly* good, as opposed to an unspecific relation between qualities they *actually possess* and the good. This is what I will argue in the following section.

1. **Fittingness**

In this section, I defend a *Fittingness* view. On this view, virtuous humility involves having the proper disposition toward objects of worth. It is this proper disposition that makes humility independently valuable.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Let me start by suggesting that Slote’s view is best read as a *Fittingness* claim as opposed to a claim about *Dependence*. This is illustrated again with the case of the dull celebrity, where Slote (1983, 62) suggests that such a person would have “*so much to be humble about*.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Slote (1983, 63) says further that “although humility seems lacking unless it is ‘about’ valued traits, the range of valuable traits that are appropriate ‘targets’ of valued humility seems wide and open ended.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The “aboutness” that Slote refers to is, I wish to suggest, a matter of *Fittingness* as opposed to *Dependence*. Certainly, the scrupulous prosecutor is not imagined to be conscientious *about* her decency. By contrast, Slote describes the humble person as being humble *about* their good qualities. So, Slote’s assertion about the dull celebrity case is in error. The problem with the dull celebrity is not that they require another virtue to be virtuously humble; rather, the problem is that they are not even exercising humility because they lack a proper disposition toward the qualities fitting for it.

Although I think that Slote’s view is best read as a *Fittingness* claim, and so is in line with the account I am about to present, the view I develop here differs from Slote’s in two ways. I will differentiate our views from each other by considering Slote’s claim (1983, 63) that, “some goods and virtues, in other words, depend (respectively) on other goods and virtues for their value.”

First, on my view, humility can take non-virtuous goods such as winning a race or writing a book, as objects even if one’s virtues ultimately contributed to the production of those goods. As I shall argue, these goods just have to be objectively good—it is unnecessary to fully possess those good qualities to be humble. Second, humility’s value is independent of these goods. I demonstrate this independence with the following argument: suppose we grant that the objects of one’s humility are value-conferring. The humble person can take their own humility as an object. So, humility can confer value to itself. I call this view *Bootstrapped Fittingness*.

* 1. *Objective and Subjective Goods*

First, I think that the humble person can take non-virtuous goods as objects. I think this because it seems unusually narrow, perhaps overly moralistic, for Slote to restrict the objects of one’s humility to one’s other virtues. We ordinarily think that people can be humble about many of their desirable but non-virtuous qualities; and when we say someone can be humble about their good qualities, we mean that those qualities are fitting objects for one’s humility, or that the humble person is *right* to be humble about that object. Contrary to Slote, it does not follow from the *Fittingness* view that *the object* confers value. Rather, it is the proper *disposition* to take some object as the target of one’s humility that is valuable.

To explain what makes this disposition proper, I am going to sketch a subjectivist version and an objectivist version of *Fittingness*. On the subjectivist view, the humble person can properly take qualities that they themselves judge to be good. On the objectivist version, having the proper disposition requires that one take objectively good qualities.

On the subjectivist view, an agent’s judgment that some object is good is what makes that object fitting. This means that being humble about one’s subjectively good qualities is necessary to make humility virtuous. One reason to endorse this view is to avoid charges of elitism. For instance, consider one of Wolf’s (2010) examples of activities that are merely subjectively meaningful, such as making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*. Maybe a person might have narrow interests that only they find valuable, and perhaps, we should not exclude the possibility that one can be humble about those interests.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The subjectivist view faces two problems. First, it fails to capture other virtues in the vicinity of humility that include people’s good qualities, such as pride. It does not seem plausible, for instance, that one can be virtuously prideful of one’s ability to copy books. We tend to think that proper pride concerns objects of true merit and value. Likewise, it does not seem that one can be prideful or humble about having won the lottery because winning is a matter of luck. One might refrain from bragging about having won the lottery, and this may show *some* virtue—perhaps, being considerate of the feelings of less fortunate others—but I think we would not call this virtuous *humility.* This is because the person who *does* brag about winning the lottery misunderstands what is good. The subjectivist view thus fails to capture the fittingness constraint on proper humility and proper pride.

Second, the subjectivist view gives us no resources to explain why the so-called arrogant humility of the pseudo-philosopher discussed above is not true humility. The pseudo-philosopher attempts to claim humility in being rejected or ignored by experts, because they wrongly believe that their project makes a meaningful contribution to the discourse, when in fact, it does not. This seems to be a manifestation of arrogance. For a more straightforward example, consider the utterance, “if I really wanted to, I could be an amazing philosopher.”[[18]](#footnote-18) In ordinary circumstances, the person who makes this kind of declaration would not be judged to be genuinely interested in pursuing philosophy. What would decisively make this declaration arrogant is if the speaker thinks that they have “humbly” stepped aside to let lesser-minded people engage in the activity, or if they are belittling its significance (“Who *couldn’t* be an amazing philosopher? It’s all junk anyways.”) Even if we were to imagine that, in fact, becoming a great philosopher is a possibility for the speaker, what makes their utterance arrogant in this case *just is* their subjective judgment. They engage in self-flattery about the mere prospect of being an amazing philosopher as opposed to rightly appraising the value of doing philosophy. This is the explanation that best explains the arrogance of people who *do* possess the good quality in question, and those who *do not*. Indeed, even if we were to hear the *best* philosopher say, “If I wanted to, I could solve the mind-body problem,” they seem to misunderstand what makes philosophy *objectively* valuable. Merely judging some quality to be good, or to be in one’s possession, is not enough to make that quality a proper object of humility. There needs to be something independently good about the activity that the speaker gets right, and in this case, the speaker does not seem to be right about why philosophy is good.

We should turn now to an objectivist view. To say that humility depends on having other objectively good qualities means that the humble person’s good quality is good independently of their judgment. There must be some condition that says, for instance, that grandmaster-level chess skill is fitting for humility, whereas copying books by hand is unfitting.

* 1. *Bootstrapped Fittingness*

If we agree that only objectively good qualities can be fitting for a humble disposition, we can now turn to whether a person must *possess* these qualities to be humble. I think not. What matters instead is the humble disposition itself.

Um has recently argued that individuals can be humble without any good qualities. Um (2019, 314) offers the following example:

Suppose that Joshua is a modest violinist who is admired for his virtuosity. Even though people give him unsparing praise for his technique, he does not take either people’s praise or his excellent technique as a reason to consider himself to be fundamentally superior to others. One day, unfortunately, he loses his left arm in a car accident. Now his violin technique is gone and nothing has left for people to praise him for. Then, is it appropriate to say that his modesty, too, is gone with his technique? It does not seem right.

While I agree with Um that one does not need to fully possess the quality in question to be humble, I do not find this example to be decisive. I agree that Joshua’s modesty does not vanish when he loses his left arm, and in turn, his technique. But one might argue that the claim that Joshua can still be modest *about his technique* is imprecise. Rather, it seems that Joshua is still modest because he has good qualities in the vicinity of playing well. His technique, by contrast, was one aspect of his objectively good qualities in the realm of music. We expect Joshua to have many other objectively valuable qualities that were integral for adopting the skillful technique in question—such as the ability to read music, to respond to various musical cues, to persevere against failure, and so on. Surely those qualities have not disappeared with the loss of his arm. While Joshua might be modest about *such* *qualities*, it does not seem to be true that Joshua is modest about playing the violin if he can no longer play. Notice that this is a very narrow sense in which Joshua’s modesty is gone; Um is essentially correct that if *this* is all *Dependence* is saying, the loss of modesty about one good quality does not matter for valuing Joshua’s modest disposition.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, Um’s argument is not decisive, because the example could be extended further by supposing also that Joshua has lost the ability to read music, to respond to various musical cues, to persevere against failure, and so on. Our intuitions still seem to demand that *something* be good (or have been good) *about* Joshua.

To show that virtuous humility does not depend on possessing any objectively good qualities *whatsoever*, we would need an example of someone whose character is otherwise morally neutral, while still manifesting the virtue. The character Patrick Star in the children’s cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* might serve as such an example. In one episode, Patrick receives a trophy in the mail for “doing absolutely nothing longer than anyone else,” which he joyfully accepts before resigning to sleep under his rock. It appeared that receiving this award had a great effect on humbling Patrick, because he no longer felt the need to compare himself to his friend’s accomplishments.

I think we can agree, however, that without any objectively good qualities, not only does Patrick lack virtue, but he seems to manifest improper pride when he accepts that he is unaccomplished.[[20]](#footnote-20) Patrick fails to recognize that he himself is his own biggest obstacle to developing good, because he has accepted mediocrity as an achievement. A virtuously humble Patrick would at least be motivated by something, such as the pursuit of at least one good quality. The problem with Patrick is not lacking other good qualities, but that he accepts mediocrity as an achievement, while in fact, mediocrity is not a part of what it means to be humble. So, even if Patrick had a conception of humility as “it would be fitting for humility to accept mediocrity as an achievement,” he would fail to be humble on account of being mistaken about what virtuous humility demands. He may have a humble disposition simply by not permitting obstacles, such as his improper pride, to get in the way of his pursuit.[[21]](#footnote-21) In doing so, he would then possess an objectively good quality to be humble about.

A different explanation of Patrick’s lack of humility is Hurka’s (2001, 110). On this view, attitudes ought to be proportional to the goodness of their object. According to Hurka, a modest person’s “responses to her own and others’ merits must be roughly proportioned to their magnitude.” Hurka says that this proportional attitude is necessary but not sufficient, since one could still take pleasure in one’s achievements without bragging or believing that they are meaningful. To put things in familiar Aristotelian terms, it seems that one can be both excessively and deficiently humble; excessive humility roughly means believing that one lacks abilities or skills that they truly possess, that is, one lacks appropriate confidence in oneself; deficiencies of humility involve overestimating one’s good qualities and having undue pride or arrogance.

The issue with Hurka’s proportionality view, however, is that the goods fitting for humility are often non-moral in nature, so it is not the moral *magnitude* of the activity that matters, so much as it is the *objective value* of the type of activity or quality involved. Attempts to construe grandmaster chess ability as having moral value (for instance, because of the pleasure they give to spectators or others) seem misleading. Rather, it is the *highly skilled* nature of the activity that can make it objectively meritorious. Regardless of the agent’s attitudes, no amount of copying *War and Peace* seems to warrant humility.[[22]](#footnote-22) By contrast, it seems that chess ability is the sort of ability that can warrant humility regardless of whether one is a grandmaster or beginner. This explains why high-achieving and comparably low-achieving persons can exhibit equally virtuous humility about the same activity—why, for instance, both Hikaru Nakamura and I can both be humble about our chess ability.

But even aside from skill, the objectivist view also accounts for the wide variety of experiences that are often said to be humbling, depending on one’s relation to those experiences. We can imagine, for instance, an aristocrat being humble about their wealth, and an impoverished single mother being humble about her lack of wealth. This would suggest that it is not so much the proportion or valence of the experience, but whether the experience is the kind of thing that can be humbling or not. This squares with our intuition that, broadly speaking, a strong character is developed through both adversity and accomplishment, and explains why we often include broader experiences that are humbling, like viewing images of the Milky Way. An objectivist view does not require introducing proportionality to discriminate between skill levels or types of activity and experience that may be the content of a humble disposition.

Now, I will turn to showing how one might have humility without an objectively good quality. The most decisive illustration of humility without the possession of an objectively good quality is a case of mistaken judgment. A person can be humble without fully possessing some good quality because the quality is a fitting object.

For example, imagine that a good writer, Mary, reads in the newspaper that she won a prestigious writer’s prize in a contest. But, unbeknownst to her, the real winner is someone who shares her name. While mistakenly believing that she has won the prize for her writing ability, we can imagine Mary staying humble by exhibiting some of the laundry list considerations mentioned earlier; she does not brag about her achievement, or have a more inflated view of herself overall, and so on. It seems that we can still say that Mary has a humble or modest character, even though she does not have the quality she believes she does.[[23]](#footnote-23)

What is more, suppose that Mary is not a good writer but a *mediocre* writer, and her false belief about having won the prize is an innocent mistake. Even so, it seems that her humble disposition is valuable apart from the fitting object, which she does not possess. To be sure, it is unlikely that the virtuously humble person would *never* make mistakes about their good qualities, especially when they are on the path to cultivating those qualities, and not all wins or losses on that path are conclusive indicators of one’s worth.[[24]](#footnote-24) In fact, then, humility might *arise* from this relation to a fitting object that one does not fully possess. The value in Mary’s humility cannot be owed to her possession of mediocre writing ability, particularly since she has made a mistake about her own worth.

Although Mary is mistaken about having won the prize, her humility is valuable because of her proper relation to the objectively good quality—that is, she has the proper attitudes or disposition toward writing well.[[25]](#footnote-25) Writing well is a skill that Mary possesses in part, and presumably, this skill is an objective good fitting for humility. In this case, we are not drawn to something about Mary’s skill or possession of some good quality that makes her humility valuable. Rather, we are just drawn to this proper relation that she has to the good.

Therefore, the reason a person’s humility does not vanish when they lose some good quality, or they lack the quality in full, has to do with the nature of humility itself, not the object that they are being humble about. So, when we try to imagine humility in someone with no good qualities *whatsoever*, we find that they would still need to be the kind of person who has this proper relation to objective goods. Indeed, this relation itself seems like an independently good quality to have. Furthermore, even if we were to think that the activity itself confers value, the following argument would show that humility could depend on itself, and even if one only possesses humility in part:

1. The objective merit of a good quality confers value to humility.
2. Humility is a good quality.
3. Therefore, humility can confer value to itself.

I argued for Premise 1 at the beginning of section 4, by describing Slote’s view as a *Fittingness* relation as opposed to a *Dependence* relation. I argued for Premise 2 in section 3, when I showed that views against humility’s virtuousness, such as Dillon’s and Bloomfield’s, still attempt to explain why humility is valuable. This argument refutes the last remainder of *Dependence*, which, as Slote originally intended, is value conferment without individuation. The argument leads us to the following claim about humility’s independent value:

*Bootstrapped Fittingness:* If one is virtuously humble, then one has the proper attitudes

or disposition toward objectively good qualities fitting for humility, where one such quality may be humility itself (or the process of cultivating virtuous humility).

*Bootstrapped Fittingness* shows that, no matter what the objectively good property is that we are humble about, there must be some level of proper regard for things that are good. The appeal of the view can be best illustrated if we consider a religious context. According to Christian doctrine, for instance, one confesses to one’s sins, humbly submits themselves to God, and in so doing, one’s humility precludes disparaging others for not yet having found redemption or forgiveness. Hence, without bootstrapping, there is a serious worry that such humility would appear self-righteous and condescending to non-believers. Setting the truth or objective value of religious doctrine aside, *Bootstrapped Fittingness* also intuitively applies in the pursuit of objectively meaningful goods, particularly in aesthetic or creative domains. When we first pick up an instrument to make music, or a brush to make art, or a pen to write, our humility is not limited to our performance in those domains. It is not the level of skill or goodness of *one’s own* quality that imparts value. What matters is just the appropriate disposition toward an objectively good activity. When a beginner is humble, the content of their disposition is this pursuit of an objective good, or the recognition that others have done good.

Let me reiterate a few consequences that *Bootstrapped Fittingness* has for Slote’s view. First, Slote is correct that humility’s value does not depend on some particular good quality (let alone, some particular virtue). However, the good thing that humility might depend on is *itself* (and not even as a full virtue, but as a virtue in progress). Humility is about having the proper attitudes about things that are fit objects of humility, rather than having the proper attitudes toward one’s worth. This is consistent with *Uniqueness*, because humility’s individuating properties will still be its source of value.

Second, to avoid charges of elitism, moralism, or demandingness, we must remain neutral about the specific kinds of activities or qualities that one could be virtuously humble about. I should remark, however, that my account here is at least much less demanding than Slote’s original interpretation. Recall that both *Specific* and *Unspecific Dependence* require the agent to possess other *virtues*. When Slote (1983, 62) describes *Dependence*, he claims that “some goods and virtues, in other words, depend (respectively) on other goods and virtues for their value.” Additionally, recall that Slote (1983, 63) uses humility to say that it requires other virtues “to attain its full status as a virtue.” Even though virtues are goods, Slote’s view implies that other virtues that are *not* dependent have full status.

That implication strikes me as unwelcome. First, we commonly understand people to be humble about their non-virtuous good qualities, such as winning a marathon and being good at chess, as opposed to virtues such as kindness or patience. Second, since full virtue is already rare, even fewer people would be expected to possess virtuous humility, and *Dependence* makes the possession of virtuous humility comparably difficult. This seems to run contrary to the thought that many moral virtues, including humility, are available for everyone to obtain and exercise in their ordinary lives.[[26]](#footnote-26) *Bootstrapped Fittingness* avoids this worry, since the bar for possessing at least one objectively good quality is intuitively much lower than that for possessing a virtue. Third, and finally, *Bootstrapped Fittingness* shows what is possible under the assumption that good qualities can in fact confer value to humility. Without this bootstrapping, value conferment is admittedly quite strange. A person may possess mathematical genius and be humble about that good quality, but surely, simply *being* a mathematical genius is not what is valuable about one’s humility. The shift from *Dependence* to *Fittingness* addresses this concern, and the possibility of bootstrapping allows us to preserve the intuition that whatever humility’s individuating property, it is *that* which confers value.

Ultimately then, I share the thought—in views such as Driver’s and Bommarito’s—that we often do not aim to be humble. Humility is something that *arises* from the consideration that some objects are fitting, but we often do not need to consciously attend to these objects or intend to be humble about them, or even possess them to be virtuously humble. Value is conferred to humility not by the good qualities themselves, but rather, by the proper attitudes or disposition toward the objectively good qualities fitting for humility.

1. **Conclusion**

This paper considered three views about humility’s value: *Specific Dependence*, *Unspecific Dependence*, and *Fittingness*. Most philosophers rightly assume that the property that individuates humility will confer value to it, and in so assuming, attempt to satisfy *Uniqueness*—a theoretical desideratum when it comes to explaining what humility is. I rejected *Specific* and *Unspecific Dependence* for their failure to be reconciled with *Uniqueness*. I suggested that Slote’s original Dependence claim be interpreted as one of *Fittingness*, since he understands value to be conferred to humility when one has good qualities to be humble *about*.

I argued, however, that even if we assume that value is conferred this way, humility can itself be such a good quality. One need not possess objectively good qualities, but simply take such objects as fitting. A humble disposition arises from this activity, and therefore, humility’s value is independent.

Although humility itself is not an unusual virtue, since I have shown how it can be accommodated by traditional virtue theory, I showed that the Dependence relation is a lot more complex than assumed. Indeed, we might imagine something like Bootstrapped Fittingness applying to other virtues as well. (Gratitude comes to mind, for instance, since it seems possible for one to be grateful for one’s own gratitude.) But I left it an open question exactly what sorts of things may count as fitting for humility specifically. I did this to avoid charges of elitism, despite its being clear that some things (e.g., finding cures for diseases) are fitting for humility whereas other things (e.g., doing crossword puzzles) are not fitting. Of course, what qualities count as objectively good or meaningful is beyond the scope of this paper, but we might consider further whether there is one-to-one correspondence between things that are objectively meaningful and those that are fitting for humility. I believe I have shown, however, that humility can be fitting for itself.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for the many helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper I received from Iskra Fileva, Christian B. Miller, and two anonymous referees for *Philosophia*.

**References**

Badhwar, Neera K. 1996. “The Limited Unity of Virtue.” *Noûs* 30 (3): 306–29.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2216272>.

Ben-Ze’ev, Aaron. 1993. “The Virtue of Modesty.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (3):

235–46.

Bloomfield, Paul. 2020. “Humility Is Not a Virtue.” In *The Routledge Handbook of the*

*Philosophy of Humility*, edited by Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Alessandra

Tanesini, 36–46. New York: Routledge.

Bommarito, Nicolas. 2013. “Modesty as a Virtue of Attention.” *Philosophical Review* 122 (1):

93–117. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-1728723>.

———. 2018. “Modesty and Humility.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by

Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/modesty-humility/>.

Brennan, Jason. 2007. “Modesty Without Illusion.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

75 (1): 111–28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2007.00062.x>.

Callahan, Laura F. 2021. “Humility for Everyone: A No-Distraction Account.” *Philosophy and*

*Phenomenological Research* 104 (3): 623–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12803>.

Dillon, Robin. 2020. “Humility and Self-Respect: Kantian and Feminist Perspectives.” In *The*

*Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Humility*, edited by Mark Alfano, Michael P.

Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini, 59–71. New York: Routledge.

———. 2015. “Humility, Arrogance, and Self-Respect in Kant and Hill.” In *Reason, Value,*

*and Respect: Kantian Themes from the Philosophy of Thomas E. Hill, Jr.*, edited by Mark

Timmons and Robert N. Johnson, 42–69.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199699575.003.0003>.

Driver, Julia. 1989. “The Virtues of Ignorance.” *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (7): 373–84.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2027146>.

———. 2001. *Uneasy Virtue*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511498770>.

———. 2003. “The Conflation of Moral and Epistemic Virtue.” *Metaphilosophy* 34 (3): 367–

83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00279>.

Flanagan, Owen. 1990. “Virtue and Ignorance.” *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (8): 420–8.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2026736>.

Hare, Stephen. 1996. “The Paradox of Moral Humility.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33

(2): 235–41.

Hurka, Thomas. 2001. *Virtue, Vice, and Value*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hughes, Derick. 2022. “Demystifying Humility’s Paradoxes.” *Episteme*: 1–18.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2022.6>.

Kant, Immanuel. (1797) 1996. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Edited by Mary Gregor. New York:

Cambridge University Press.

———. 1997. *Lectures on Ethics*. Edited by Peter Heath and Jerome B. Schneewind. Translated

by Peter Heath. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McMullin, Irene. 2010. “A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuousness of Modesty.”

*Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (241): 783–807. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2010.655.x>.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1887) 2006. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Maudemarie

Clark and Alan J. Swensen. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Nuyen, A. T. 1998. “Just Modesty.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1): 101–9.

O’Hagan, Emer. 2018. “Modesty as an Excellence in Moral Perspective Taking.” *European*

*Journal of Philosophy* 26 (3): 1120–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12323>.

Roberts, Robert C., and W. Jay Wood. 2007. *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative*

*Epistemology*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199283675.001.0001>.

Robinson, Brian. 2020. “‘I Am so Humble!’: On the Paradoxes of Humility.” In *The Routledge*

*Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*, edited by Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini, 26–35. New York: Routledge.

Russell, Daniel C. 2009. *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*. New York: Oxford University

Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199565795.001.0001>.

Schueler, G.F. 1997. “Why Modesty Is a Virtue.” *Ethics* 107 (3): 467–85.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/233745>.

Sidgwick, Henry. 1962 [1907]. *The Methods of Ethics* (7th Edition). Toronto: Palgrave

Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-81786-3>.

Slote, Michael. 1983. *Goods and Virtues*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Statman, Daniel. 1992. “Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment.” *Philosophical*

*Quarterly* 42 (169): 420–38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220284>.

Tanesini, Alessandra. 2018. “Intellectual Humility as Attitude.” *Philosophy and*

*Phenomenological Research* 96 (2): 399–420. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12326>.

Um, Sungwoo. 2019. “Modesty as an Executive Virtue.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 56

(3): 303–17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/48570638>.

Whitcomb, Dennis, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder. 2017.

“Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological*

*Research* 94 (3): 509–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12228>.

Williams, Bernard. 1981. *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139165860>.

Wilson, Alan T. 2016. “Modesty as Kindness.” *Ratio* 29 (1): 73–88.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/rati.12045>.

———. “Unity of the Intellectual Virtues.” *Synthese* 199 (3–4): 9835–54.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-021-03227-z>.

Wolf, Susan. 2007. “Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues.” *Ratio* 20 (2): 145–67.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2007.00354.x>.

Wolf, Susan. 2010. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University

Press.

1. I will treat modesty and humility as identical in this article, because *Dependence* has been attributed to both traits, and there is little agreement about a distinction between the two. See, for instance, Bommarito (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Another well-known variation on this example is attributed to Sidgwick (1962, 202), who in turn, attributes the case to Bentham. See Sidgwick (1962, 202). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Slote describes metaphysical dependence as the idea that a virtue requires another inherently valuable trait or quality to exist. So, metaphysically dependent traits are defined in part by the same feature that makes them morally valuable. Slote offers saintliness as an example of a metaphysically dependent virtue. According to Slote (1983, 64), saintliness depends on decency for its existence because there is no such thing as indecent saintliness. Additionally, Slote (1983, 64n3) does not rule out the possibility that decency depends on another virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. At least, this is Slote’s understanding of conscientiousness. If conscientiousness does not seem neutral enough, readers can substitute it for introversion or openness to experience. Additionally, as Callahan’s formulation of *Uniqueness* shows, the question is how to distinguish humility from other virtues as opposed to other traits, implying that humility already has virtue status. For Slote, *Dependence* is significant because it imparts *full virtue status* to morally neutral traits or, at best, non-virtuous goods. I return to this point in section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Relatedly, many philosophers think that humility is paradoxical, since utterances of the sort, “I am humble” seem contradictory in a way that utterances like “I am generous” do not. See, Driver (1989), Statman (1992), Hare (1996), Brennan (2007), Robinson (2020). Hughes (2022) recently offers a criticism of these views. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ben-Ze’ev (1993, 235) for instance, says that “like modesty, sincerity is a fundamental virtue, and that such two virtues could be contradictory by definition is not plausible.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Various criticisms of Driver (1989) include Flannagan (1990), Brennan (2007), and Wilson (2016). See Schueler (1997, 468) for additional comments on Driver’s interpretation of *Dependence*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Also see McMullin (2010) and Wilson (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. More specifically, Driver (1989, 384) says that “modesty implicitly involves comparison.” Kant’s view is noncomparative. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Statman (1992, 438) writes, “either […] the virtue of modesty altogether; or to keep it in our list of virtues through the kind of interpretation I have proposed in this last part of the essay.” Compare with Ben-Ze’ev’s (1993) egalitarian view. To reiterate, such dilemmas arise because philosophers assume that humility’s individuating properties make it valuable. Driver (1989, 384) too, writes that “The person who wants to retain [… knowledge and practical wisdom] as necessary for an account of moral virtue is now faced with the necessity of jettisoning a whole class of character traits which seem to be virtues.” Driver thinks that we are either forced to accept are modesty as sincere ignorance account, or completely reject modesty as a virtue. This is surely a false dilemma. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Similarly, Toner (2014, 226) roughly defines a cardinal virtue as, “one to which other virtues are subordinate, but which is subordinate to no other virtue.” Plato’s classic list of cardinal virtues, for instance, includes courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice; Aristotle embraced a more radically inclusive list of cardinal virtues which lacks a clear structure, and loosely contains virtues such as magnificence, pride, friendliness, truthfulness, among several others. Aristotle (2009, 1107a20) thought that some character traits are defined in part by their evaluative properties—that having courage and temperance, for instance, implies that one is virtuous, since there is no excess or deficiency with respect to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a survey and critique of these views, though about intellectual virtue, see Wilson (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I write in terms of a “proper disposition” for the following reason: even if *Dependence* succeeds, it would give us an account of local humility only. A person might have various good qualities and be humble about one of them but not about another. But virtues are traditionally supposed to be global, so the framing here in terms of proper dispositions helps carve out a framework for an account of humility as a global character trait. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. While I cast Driver as making a *Specific Dependence* claim in section 2, she also makes a *Fittingness* claim. Driver (1989, 379) writes, “the modest person has to be modest about *something*” [emphasis in original]. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I draw largely on Wolf (2010, 36–40) to develop the objective worth condition and also share her worry that such a condition may be elitist. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I adapt this example from Driver (2001, 76–7). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Um would argue, rightfully I think, that the modest person’s characteristic attitudes are different from the goods they promote. For illustration, Um (2019, 307) compares modesty to courage, arguing that failures of courage stem from failures to appropriately control one’s fear as opposed to failures of behaving benevolently or honestly. Hence, courage is constituted by a willingness to overcome obstacles as opposed to some characteristic target end of promoting benevolence. Likewise, modesty is constituted by what Um calls a moderate evaluative attitude, as opposed to that attitude’s tendency to promote benevolence by helping agents refrain from bragging or from hurting other people’s feelings, for instance. Modesty, like courage, is taken to serve this executive function of helping promote benevolence while not depending on benevolence. However, this would not successfully reject the specific and unspecific varieties of *Dependence*, because if modesty were an executive virtue, it would lack value on its own for the reasons I articulated in section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a discussion of proper pride (again, of the intellectual variety) see Tanesini (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Whitcomb et al.’s (2017) limitations-owning view might be of use here, though it would need to be adapted from epistemic goods to moral goods (barring issues of conflation (Driver 2003)). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. One might argue that introducing a competitive aspect would make these activities possible objects fitting for humility. However, introducing competition also changes the nature of the activity. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I thank an anonymous reviewer at *Philosophia* for this example. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This thought roughly forms the basis for doxastic views of humility (e.g., Driver 1989, Flanagan 1990, Brennan 2007, McMullin 2010). Notice that I am just claiming that the virtuously humble person is *permitted* to make mistakes about their own good qualities, not that making such mistakes would make them either more or less humble. So, I am not suggesting that accuracy or beliefs about one’s worth matter for how humility is constituted. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I am assuming that the prizes track merit in these examples, since it is the quality itself that would be objectively good, not just winning the prize. However, we could describe Mary as making the same mistake. For instance, if the prize was merely tracking popularity, and Mary believes this, then Mary would be mistaken about what is good, since prizes are not objectively good by themselves. If Mary *mistakenly* believes that the prize is tracking merit when it is tracking popularity, she would be making an innocent mistake much like the one I described initially. It would be quite a different story if, to take an extreme case, Mary believes that she has won (or even, is deserving of) the Nobel prize in literature. In such a case, we would rightly worry that Mary misunderstands what makes writing an objectively valuable activity, or we might have reason to think that it is not the writing that Mary is being humble about, but something else, such as the value that her writing might impart to readers. However, these issues ultimately turn on what makes the activity under consideration objectively valuable. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a recent defense of this claim, see Callahan (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)