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2

“I am so humble!” on the paradoxes of humility

Brian Robinson

2.1 Introduction

Humility is a paradoxical virtue. This should come as no great surprise. It doesn’t take much explanation for one to realize that if someone is boasting about how humble he is, then he probably is not humble. In fact, as we shall see, the paradoxical nature of humility has a long history, going back to at least Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. While it may not be a novel claim that there exists an apparent paradox of humility, I will argue that there is more than one humility paradox, perhaps as many as five: the epistemic paradox, the paradox of self-attribution, the inculcation paradox, the agentic paradox, and the axiological paradox. All these paradoxes are distinct, yet seemingly intertwined. Upon examining them each in turn, we will be left with a Gordian knot of humility paradoxes. I will begin by discussing each paradox in turn.

To unravel this knot, it helps to consider what precisely humility is. In the past decade, a wellspring of new literature has emerged, offering new insight on this old virtue. Between older and more recent scholarship on this virtue, two differing conceptions of humility arise. All of them agree that a central aspect of humility has to do with how one regards oneself. On the first (and perhaps oldest) view, people’s humility is based on *how* they assess themselves. Here humility is about having a low self-assessment (either in general or in some particular domain), whereas pride is having a high self-assessment. The second view of humility sees the trait as based not on how one views oneself, but *how often* one considers one’s merit, status, or accomplishments. A humble person is inattentive (rather than inaccurate) to one’s

status. I will argue that this second conception of humility is able to cut the Gordian knot of the paradoxes of humility.

2.2 Paradoxes

It is generally not debated that President Trump likes to brag. One of the most fascinating things he sometimes brags about is his own humility. For example, on CBS’s *Face The Nation* he said, “I do have actually much more humility than a lot of people would think” (Dickerson, 2016). On his beloved medium of Twitter, he wrote, “The new Pope is a humble man, very much like me, which probably explains why I like him so much!” (Trump, 2013).

There is something intuitively odd about these boasts. As Alfano and I argue, bragging is about trying to impress others with something about yourself (Alfano and Robinson, 2014). Humility, regardless of its precise nature, is antithetical to trying to impress someone, either because you don’t regard yourself (or the relevant aspect of yourself) as impressive, or because you are not attending to what is impressive about yourself. To humblebrag, as President Trump did in these comments, is to try to impress others with how much you don’t regard yourself as impressive.

This leads us to our first paradox of humility, the **self-attribution paradox of humility**. Consider again the utterance by speaker S, “I am *so* humble!” By producing this utterance, S has (typically) generated a paradox based on what S is attributing to herself. S is bragging. Yet, if she is in fact humble, it would seem that *ipso facto* she would not brag. Hence, boasts about one’s own humility are *ceteris paribus* false. By attributing humility to herself, S has indicated that she is not humble. Hume appears to recognize this problem when he states, “Tis impossible a man can at the same time be both proud and humble” (*Treatise* 2.1.1).

This category of paradox is distinct then from paradoxes of self-reference (like the liar paradox) where the paradox is generated in part due to the sentence or utterance referring to itself. For example, “This sentence is false” is paradoxical

because the sentence refers to itself. In saying “I’m humble,” my utterance does not refer back to itself. Rather, I attribute a characteristic to myself that may be akin to a pragmatic contradiction (like saying, “I don’t exist”); if I truly possess that characteristic, I (typically)¹ will not have made the utterance in question. In short, we can put the paradox this way: typically, anyone who says they are humble is not, and anyone who is humble will not say so.

The second paradox is the **epistemic paradox of humility**. Let’s assume that knowledge is infallible: something must be true for us to know it. In that case, S cannot know that she is humble unless she is. Yet, if S is humble, then (typically) S cannot know that she is humble; her humility obscures this self-knowledge. This paradox has long been noticed, at least as far back as the sixteenth century, by the Catholic St. Teresa of Avila and the Protestant Martin Luther. Luther notes, “True humility, therefore never knows that it is humble ... for if it knew this, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue” (Luther, 1956, p. 375). Likewise, St. Teresa remarks that humility (and other virtues) “have the property of hiding themselves from one who possesses them, in such a way that he never sees them nor can believe that he has any of them, even if he be told so” (Avila, 1980, p. 77).

In addition to paradoxes regarding saying or knowing you are humble, there is a similar problem for becoming humble. The Neo-Aristotelian standard account of how one develops a virtue is through habitation (Alfano, 2016, p. 118). As Aristotle puts it,

But the virtues we get by first practicing them, as we do in the arts. For it is by doing what we ought to do when we study the arts that we learn the arts themselves; we become builders by building and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, it is by doing just act; that we

¹ There are special cases in which a humble person can be induced to utter, “I’m humble,” without producing a paradox of self-attribution. I will address these below.

become just, by doing temperate acts that we become temperate, by doing brave acts that we become brave.

(*Nicomachean Ethics*, book II.1)

This process of virtue inculcation through habituation requires intentionality. One must intentionally perform just acts in order to become just. When it comes to humility, however, this process will not work. As Alfano and I argue elsewhere, one cannot intend to become humble (Robinson and Alfano, 2016, p. 439). A humble person typically does not brag, does not seek out praise from others, and demurs when praised. If one sought out praise in order to practice demurring (as a means of becoming humble), one has failed to be humble by seeking out praise from others in the first place. Likewise, someone who intentionally does not brag (knowing she could, but choosing not to) has not performed a humble act, but rather demonstrated false modesty. Humility is not something you can attain by trying. We can call this the **inculcation paradox of humility**.

So far, none of the paradoxes assume anything terribly controversial, I take it, and can be widely accepted. Not everyone, however, may be as willing to recognize the legitimacy of the next two humility paradoxes. They both make various philosophical assumptions that, while not outside the mainstream, are not universally endorsed by philosophers. Consider next the **agentic paradox of humility**. While there remains considerable debate in action theory, it is not uncommon to claim that an action must be intended by an agent in order to count as an action (Davidson, 1980). The problem for humility is that (typically) one cannot intend to act humbly and then successfully do so. You may intend to act humbly, but whatever act you then perform will *not* be a humble act. Rather, such an action would demonstrate false modesty. For example, I have just praised you for a recent accomplishment. You now intend to act humbly by demurring and saying it was “No big deal,” and pointing out that it was not as noteworthy as someone else’s recent achievement. Based on that intention you act accordingly, but not humbly. You tried too hard, demurring not because you in fact are humble but for some other reason, such as conforming to social expectation. Though more can be

said to flesh out this claim, all that is needed at present is to note that something certainly seems paradoxical here. Different views in action theory may work out the full details of this paradox differently, but some kind of paradox will emerge out of most accounts of actions.

Lastly, we have the **axiological paradox of humility**. Humility is often considered a virtue. Virtues are good character traits for a person. Yet humility—as the name implies—requires being humbled, i.e., being brought low, brought down a peg. Being humbled does not appear to be a good state for a person to be in. Simply put interrogatively, how can it be good to be brought low? St. Aquinas noted this same problem with humility in the thirteenth century (Aquinas *ST* II-II, Q 161, A 1).² More recently, Baier makes the same point when she remarks, Humility as a virtue faces a paradox, namely that the very approval of it seems to threaten to destroy the thing approved. Pride in due pride presents no paradox, and neither does shame for shame, but pride in shame and shame for pride are at best unstable, degenerate cases of reflexivity (1991, p. 216).

These paradoxes are not, I think, intractable. I follow Burge in being guided by the assumption that the paradoxes are best approached as resources for understanding deep and subtle features of our language and concepts, rather than as symptoms of contradiction or incoherence in them. Insofar as the paradoxes are not resolved, they are symptoms of confusion or mistakes in our assumptions about our language and concepts (1984, p. 7).

² I suspect that there may be a separate, sixth paradox regarding motivation, specifically regarding an apparent lack of motivation to be humble (or to be humbled, which appears to be necessary to be humble), even granting that humility is good or a virtue. This paradox would likely assume some form of motivational externalism. Attempts to formulate the paradox have so far, however, collapsed into standard problems with motivational externalism (and therefore are not problems unique to humility) or collapsed into one of the other five paradoxes.

23 Two theories of humility

Unfortunately, our problems with humility do not end with these paradoxes. There is also a lack of consensus on the basic nature of humility. For many (if not most) virtues, there is general agreement as to what the virtue essentially amounts to. Honesty is about telling the truth. Courage requires responding to danger or fear. Generosity involves giving to others. This is not to say that all the details are worked out, since they are not. How much and under what conditions truth telling, facing of danger, or giving to others are good and virtuous remain important open questions. The point, however, is that for these virtues there is agreement on a basic conceptual framework, upon which we can have these more nuanced debates. The same cannot be said for humility. Though philosophers and theologians have long considered humility, there exists a wide range of views on the nature of this trait.

One of the earliest discussions of humility as a virtue outside of the New Testament comes in the epistle 1 Clement, which was likely composed toward the end of the first century CE and has traditionally been attributed to Clement of Rome (Holmes, 2007, pp. 33–34), stating:

For Christ belongs to those who are humble-minded, not to those who vaunt themselves over the flock. The scepter of God’s majesty, the Lord Jesus Christ, did not come with an ostentatious show of arrogance or haughtiness—even though he could have done so—but with a humble mind, just as the Holy Spirit spoke concerning him.

(1 Clement 16.1–2)

While insufficient to extrapolate a theory of morality, Clement says enough for a few points to be noteworthy. First, humility isn’t mentioned per se, but being humble-minded appears to be a positive state or characteristic. Second, humility is in some way intellectual in nature, since Clement speaks of being “humble-minded.” Lastly, a clear contrast is drawn with the vice of arrogance. A few centuries later, St. Augustine likewise lauded humility in several passages. While one may be able to reconstruct an Augustinian account of humility, doing so would require

considerable textual exegesis and theological discussion beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, Augustine also appears to regard humility as a virtue, though (at least to this author) how precisely Augustine defined humility remains unclear.

A clearer account emerges in Aquinas (though perhaps earlier) and up through the present day. I will now briefly review some of the ancient, modern, and contemporary views on humility. Though we cannot here review in detail the historical development of theories of humility, the various accounts of humility can be, I think, grouped together into two general camps. In the rest of this section, I will canvas some of the views presented on humility, providing examples of thinkers in each group. This canvassing will by no means be an exhaustive account of all the philosophers and theologians to have discussed the virtue. Furthermore, by no means do I mean to suggest that there is unanimity regarding the nature of humility within these two groups; in fact, considerable debate continues within them to this day. Nevertheless, within each group there is consensus regarding the central aspect of what humility amounts to.

2.3.1 *First theory: low self-assessment*

The first, and perhaps oldest, theory of humility is that it primarily consists in accurately viewing oneself as lowly. Aquinas is one of the chief proponents of the low self-assessment view of humility. He asserts, for example, that “humility, in so far as it is a virtue, conveys the notion of a praiseworthy self-abasement to the lowest place” (*ST II-II, Q 161, A 1, ad. 2*). To be humble, as Aquinas sees it, is to see oneself as low, base, beneath God, and other humans. Others are superior, either generally or in some specific ways. This low self-assessment is not, however, some mere delusion. “It is possible, *without falsehood*” he contends, “to deem and avow oneself the most despicable of men ... [and] avow and believe oneself in all ways unprofitable and useless in respect of one’s own capability” (*ST II-II, Q 161, A 6, ad. 1*; emphasis mine). The humble person correctly assesses her or his lowly status in relations to others.

Not surprisingly, this view of humility is widespread and perhaps is the most common. Hume—though rejecting humility as one of the “monkish virtues” that “serve no purpose” (*EPM* 9.1)—is generally taken to regard humility in a similar manner, since he speaks of one’s idea of oneself as “dejected with humility” (*Treatise* 2.1.2) and appears to think humiliation is necessary for humility (c.f., Davie, 1999, p. 146).³

Other contemporary theories limit the focus, shifting from one’s low status in general to something more specific, such as one’s limitations. Snow, for example, takes this view, arguing,

To be a humble person is to recognize your limitations, to take them seriously, and thereby to foster a realism in attitudes and behavior regarding self and others. Humility can be defined as the disposition to allow the awareness of and concern about your limitations to have a realistic influence on your attitudes and behavior. At the heart of this realism is a perspective gained through accurate appraisal of your limitations and their implications for your circumstances, attitudes, and behavior

(Snow, 1995, p. 210).

Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder focus on intellectual humility specifically, which they regard as “proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one’s intellectual limitations” (2017, p. 12). Prima facie, these accounts of humility make it look different than Aquinas’s or others in this group, since they do not require one to have a low self-assessment in comparison to someone or something else. For Aquinas, for instance, one should be humbled and humble before the greatness of God. For Whitcomb et al., however, the comparison is instead with some idealized version of oneself, one without the limitations one actually has. So according to

³ Burch (1975) disputes this claim, arguing that Hume (at least in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*) considers humility to be a passion, not a character trait.

Whitcomb et al., my humility consists primarily in recognizing that I’m not as physically strong as I might wish or that I am prone to certain errors in thinking that I might otherwise delude myself in denying. For this reason, their view of humility also falls in the low, accurate self-assessment category.

Another noteworthy variant of this view agrees that humility requires low self-assessment, but this self-assessment is mistaken. The humble person underestimates herself. Spinoza, for example, appears to espouse an inaccurate, low self-assessment view of humility. First, to establish how a humble person views herself, Spinoza says, “Humility is pain arising from a man’s contemplation of his own weakness of body or mind” (*E III*, P 26). The inaccuracy of this self-assessment becomes clear when we consider what, according to Spinoza, humility gives rise to. We can, therefore, set down as a contrary to pride an emotion which I will call self-abasement, for as from self-complacency springs pride, so from humility springs self-abasement, which I will accordingly thus define: Self—abasement is thinking too meanly of one’s self by reason of pain (*E III*, P 28, Exp – P29). The inaccuracy and pain are precisely why Spinoza then concludes that “humility is not a virtue” (*E IV*, P 53). More recently, Driver calls modesty a virtue of ignorance, where “a modest person underestimates self-worth” (2004, p. 16). Though her theory is purportedly about modesty, “humility is closely akin to modesty,” she notes (Driver, 2004, p. 114).⁴

2.3.2 *Second theory: inattentive*

More recently, an alternative conception of humility has begun to emerge. It is distinct from the first since it does not require one to regard oneself as lowly or limited. Rather, humility consists in being inattentive to one’s own status, i.e., not

⁴ Driver does draw a distinction between humility and modesty. A humble person, she argues, can accurately assess his or her lowly state, while a modest person must underestimate her merit.

engaging in self-admiration of one’s merits or status or accomplishments because one does not spend much time thinking about oneself at all.

The farthest back I have been able to trace this inattentive theory of humility is to Sidgwick’s *The Method of Ethics* (1874). First, he considers the low self-assessment view of humility—which he dubs the “common sense” view—and rejects it. “It seems, then, that the common account of Humility is erroneous” (1874, p. 312). We will return shortly to his reason for rejecting this view. For now, consider the conception of humility he offers instead. He writes,

Humility is regulative of two different impulses, one entirely self-regarding and internal, the other relating to others and partly taking effect in social behaviour. The internal duty relates, strictly speaking, not to the opinions we form of ourselves (for here as in other opinions we ought to aim at nothing but Truth), but to the emotion of self-admiration, which springs naturally from the contemplation of our own merits, and as it is highly agreeable, prompts to such contemplation [T]he duty of Humility needs enforcing because most of us have a tendency to indulge this feeling [of self-approbation] overmuch . . . Humility prescribes such repression of self-satisfaction

(Sidgwick, 1874, pp. 312–313).

Humility, as Sidgwick understands it, is about limiting one’s sense of self-satisfaction or self-admiration, regardless of one’s status or merit about which one could admire.

Since Sidgwick, the inattentive view has appeared to grow in popularity. C. S. Lewis espoused it when he writes, [The humble man] will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. . . . If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed. (Lewis, 1952, p. 71). More recently still, this view is endorsed by Tangney (2000), Roberts and Wood (2003, 2007), Garcia (2006), and Robinson and Alfano (2016).

Similarly, Nadelhoffer et al. assert, “[B]eing humble doesn’t require us to hold ourselves in low regard (or in a lower regard than is merited). Instead, humility merely requires us to avoid thinking too highly of ourselves” (2017, p. 10). They call this the “decentered and devoted” view of humility, the idea being that humble people are both not centered on themselves (and their own praiseworthiness) *and also* devoted to others. This second component is typically absent in the other inattentive views, which focus only not being centered on oneself. Whether devotion to others is a central component of humility or merely a very likely consequent of it remains an open question, but the key point is that a clear family resemblance between these views exists to warrant grouping them together despite underlying differences.

24 Resolving the paradoxes

Of these two different conceptions of virtue, my objective is not to reject one over the other. Christen, Alfano, and Robinson (2014, 2017) employ a psycholexical method to analyze intellectual humility and find both conceptions in how a thesaurus tracks usage of the concept. This method is meant as a proxy for folk usage, indicating that it is common to understand and talk of humility in both ways. Likewise, Alfano et al. (2017) developed and validated a psychological measure of intellectual humility that includes both views as different factors of the virtue.

Nevertheless, it can be fruitful to consider how each view handles the knot of *prima facie* paradoxes of humility previously discussed. This analysis is not meant to settle which of the two views is meant by “humility,” but rather which of the two is perhaps more conceptually robust by avoiding or resolving the paradoxes.

Of the two general views on humility, the inattentive view is better equipped to handle each of these paradoxes. Sidgwick notes the shortcomings of the low self-assessment account of humility. Just before laying out his explanation of humility as inattention, he writes,

For it is generally said that Humility prescribes a low opinion of our own merits: but if our merits are comparatively high, it seems strange to direct us to have a low opinion of them. It may be replied, that though our merits may be high when compared with those of ordinary men, there are always some to be found superior, and we can compare ourselves with these, and in the extreme case with ideal excellence, of which all fall far short: and that we ought to make this kind of comparison and not the other kind, and contemplate our faults of which we shall assuredly find a sufficiency and not our merits. But surely in the most important deliberations which human life offers, in determining what kind of work we shall undertake and to what social functions we shall aspire, we must necessarily compare our qualifications carefully with those of other men, if we are to decide rightly. And it would seem just as irrational to underrate ourselves as to overrate: and though most men are more prone to the latter mistake, there are certainly some rather inclined to the former.

(Sidgwick, 1874, p. 312)

Sidgwick is objecting to the low self-assessment account of humility as inherently paradoxical. What exactly he considers to be the problem with this view is hard to formulate precisely, but perhaps we can help him out now that we have more clearly delineated the different paradoxes of humility. The central question is whether one’s humble self-assessment must be accurate or not. As we saw, various thinkers have advocated for two versions of the low self-assessment theory, where the low self-assessment is either accurate or inaccurate. On the one hand, if one’s humble self-assessment is (or must be) wrong—because one’s merits are actually “comparatively high”—then we run into the epistemic paradox. One’s belief, in this case, that one has low merits or status is false; therefore, one can never *know* that one has humility. Sidgwick considers this “irrational” and detrimental, since we need accurate self-assessment to determine what we should do with our lives and how to function in society. On the other hand, if one’s humble self-assessment is accurate, then we run into the axiological paradox. In this case, one’s self-assessment is correct, but it is unclear what is good or virtuous about being in and aware of this state. To these points, we can add an extra consideration Sidgwick does not address. Either way,

the paradox of self-attribution still applies. If my self-assessment must be inaccurate to be true and I say that I am humble, then I have not inaccurately assessed my own meritorious character. Alternatively, if my self-assessment must be accurate to be true and I say that I am humble, then I am bragging about my lowliness.

Sidgwick was not alone in seeing trouble for the low self-attribution views. Nadelhoffer et al. make a similar point when they remark, “One of the driving forces behind people’s unease about humility is the (we believe mistaken) assumption that being humble requires us to undervalue (even loathe) ourselves and underestimate our own capabilities” (2017, p. 8). Lewis, in his epistolary novel *The Screwtape Letters* (which contains letters from the demon Screwtape to the demon Wormwood tasked with tempting and corrupting an unnamed man), presents the problems thusly:

Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, ‘By jove! I’m being humble,’ and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt.

(Lewis, 1942, p. 58)

In addition to expressing the paradoxical nature of the low self-assessment views of humility, this passage also points to how the inattentive view of humility can unravel the Gordian knot of paradoxes. The key is to begin with the epistemic paradox. We will assume that humility amounts to inattention to one’s merit. In that case, it is not impossible for a humble person to know that she is humble. Such a belief will not typically occur to her, so she will typically lack the *occurrent* belief that she is humble. Still, as Robinson and Alfano (2016) argue, she is disposed to believe (and know) that she is humble (since she is). This dispositional belief, however, rarely becomes occurrent; it usually does not occur to her that she is

humble. When this does occur to her, it typically is due to external prompting by a third party. A humble person does not typically spend much time considering her merit and praiseworthiness. If, for some reason, you are determined to convince her that she is humble and point to ample behavioral evidence of her humility, she can truthfully, occurrently believe and know that she is humble. But then she will quickly move on and go back to being merely disposed to believe she is humble (when told by others that she is). The paradox is resolved. The knowledge of one’s own humility is not impossible; it just rarely occurs.

From here, the self-attribution paradox follows the same path. If a humble person does not attend to her own humility (because she is typically only disposed to believe she is humble), then she will not say that she is humble. This is not to say she never can accurately attribute humility to herself. Again, if you go to great length to prove to her that she is humble, then she can reluctantly admit that she is humble without a paradox. As Robinson and Alfano (2016) point out, however, such self-attribution usually has to be first prompted by a third party. The main point though is that for the inattentive theory of humility, this paradox is resolved. It is not that a humble person cannot truthfully attribute humility to herself; it’s that she typically would not.

Two paradoxes down, three to go. The inculcation paradox raises the problem of how to train people to be humble. If they try to become humble, it would seem they would necessarily fail. This paradox, I think, remains the most problematic, but it is not intractable. Robinson and Alfano (2016) have considered this problem at length, drawing lessons from the Chinese virtue of *wu-wei*, which roughly translates as “dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective” (Slingerland, 2014, p. 7). Almost by definition, one cannot try to achieve *wu-wei*, yet Confucian and Daoist thinkers developed several indirect strategies to achieve this virtuous state. In the same way, Robinson and Alfano (2016) argue part of the solution is to develop and promote rituals of demurring when praised by others and to encourage praising of others. Such rituals indirectly inculcate humility and simultaneously discourage false

modesty by making false modesty too costly to be worth the social benefit of seeming to be humble.

Regarding the agentic paradox, it is correct that one cannot intend to be humble, just as one cannot try act humbly, just as one cannot try to try. Indeed, trying to act humbly merely results in false modesty.⁵ This does not mean, however, that one therefore cannot act humbly. To act humbly, according to the inattentive account of humility, is to act in such a way that one does not attend to one’s own merit or praiseworthiness, especially when one easily could do so. Acting humbly is not something you do directly. Rather, you act humbly by not doing certain actions (e.g., boasting, showing off, or flexing) because you are doing something else instead, often some other-oriented action, such as praising or helping someone else.

Lastly, we can consider perhaps the most important of paradoxes of humility, the axiological paradoxes. Why is humility good? On the low self-assessment view, we are forced to say one of three things: that it is good to have an accurate self-assessment of one’s lowly status, that it is good to falsely believe one has a low status, or humility is not good. The inattentive conception of humility offers a different, non-contradictory resolution to the paradox. Humility is good because it is the inattention to our own merit or status. If we are not paying attention to ourselves and our own praiseworthiness, we are freed up to pay attention to more morally important considerations, such as the needs or praiseworthiness of others.

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⁵ See (Robinson and Alfano, 2016) for the distinction between humility, modesty, and false modesty.

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