**Faith and Humility: Conflict or Concord?**

Daniel Howard-Snyder and Daniel McKaughan

Forthcoming in *Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Humility*, edited by Mark Alfano, Michael Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini

In some circles, faith is said to be one of three theological virtues, along with hope and agape. But not everyone thinks faith is a virtue, theological or otherwise. Indeed, depending on how we understand it, faith may well conflict with the virtues. In this chapter we will focus on the virtue of humility. Does faith conflict with humility, or are they in concord?

In what follows, we will do five things. First, we will sketch a theory of the virtue of humility. Second, we will summarize a common view of faith, arguably held by Thomas Aquinas among others, and we will argue that Thomistic faith is not an intellectual virtue and that it conflicts with humility in the domain of inquiry. Third, we will plump for an older view of faith, one that predates Aquinas by at least 1500 years, Markan faith. Fourth, we will argue that Markan faith is an intellectual virtue and it is in concord with humility in the domain of inquiry. Fifth, we will argue that Markan faith, unlike Thomistic faith, is a personal virtue and that it is in concord with humility in the domain of personal relationships, both human-human and human-divine.

**1. The limitations-owning theory of the virtue of humility**

Theorists think of virtue in different ways. We will presuppose the *personal worth theory* (Baehr 2011; Battaly 2015). On the personal worth theory, virtues are excellences of persons, among which are character traits. A *character* *trait* of someone is a trait grounded in their motivations and values, both of which are relatively stable.

Not all character traits are virtues, however. Someone’s character trait is a *virtue* only if it makes them better as a person, and it makes them better as a person only if they are a good judge of when, toward whom, and how they exercise it, and only if it is grounded in good motivations and values. To illustrate consider someone stably disposed to give liberally but at the wrong time, toward the wrong people, or in the wrong way. They might have the trait of generosity but they lack the virtue since, for example, they tend to give too much and they tend to give to scams, cons, and fraudulent charities. Or imagine someone stably disposed to give liberally at the right time, toward the right people, and in the right way but who developed that disposition just to look good in the eyes of others, and thereby extend their power over them. They might have the trait of generosity but they lack the virtue since what grounds their disposition is bad.

Theorists also think of humility in different ways. We will presuppose the *limitations-owning theory* (Whitcomb *et al* 2017). On that theory, the trait of humility consists in being both attentive to and owning one’s limitations. *Limitations* are, roughly, the bad or not-so-good things about oneself: cognitive mistakes, e.g. errors in grading exams, or gaps in knowledge, e.g. the economics of American slavery, or deficits in cognitive skills, e.g. ignorance of statistical analysis, or intellectual character flaws, e.g. onesidedness, or moral mistakes, e.g., speaking harshly to a student, or affective shortcomings, e.g., lacking empathy, or deficits in general skills, e.g., housecleaning, or flaws in moral character, e.g., being judgmental, and so on. Someone is *attentive* to their limitations when they are so disposed that their limitations come to mind regularly, in contrast with being oblivious to them. So someone completely inattentive to their limitations is not humble. However, someone can be attentive to their limitations while also being flagrantly complacent about them, systematically concealing them from others, responding defensively when they are brought to light, and the like. They are not humble either. The humble own their limitations. Someone *owns* their limitations when they are so disposed that, if their limitations come to mind, they do not respond routinely with complacency, concealment, defensiveness, and the like. More generally, owning one’s limitations *characteristically* involves cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and affective dispositions to (i) believe or accept that one has them, (ii) admit and acknowledge them, (iii) care about them, and (iv) feel regret or dismay about them. (NB: characteristically, not always; see the paragraph after next.) If the limitations-owning theory is correct, then, among many other things, the humble will be more likely than the non-humble to admit their limitations to others, defer to others, seek help from others, and have a low concern for status, and they will be less likely to set unattainable goals and disrespect others (Whitcomb *et al* 2017, 13-26).

As we said, not all character traits are virtues. The same goes for humility. Someone might be stably disposed to attend to and own their limitations but at the *wrong* time, toward the *wrong* people, or in the *wrong* way, and someone might be stably disposed to attend to and own their limitations at the right time, toward the right people, and in the right way, yet be disposed to do so for the *wrong reason*, i.e. bad motivations or values ground their disposition. Either way, they will have the trait of humility but not the virtue of humility. On the limitations-owning theory, the *virtue* of humility is a disposition to *appropriately* attend to and *appropriately* own one’s limitations.

We can’t emphasize strongly enough that the ways in which one appropriately attends to and appropriately owns one’s limitations can both *vary significantly* across situations and *differ from* their characteristic manifestations. For example, in some cases appropriate owning may call for one to acknowledge one’s limitations to someone else, e.g., when you’ve wronged them, while in other cases it might call for one simply to admit the limitation to oneself, e.g., when we acknowledge our unhealthy sedentariness. Or compare owning one’s inability to play basketball with owning one’s chronic tardiness. If you can’t do anything about the first, say, because you’re old and decrepit, but you can do something about the second, say, because you can routinely set your alarm five minutes earlier, then appropriately owning the first might not involve feeling regret or dismay but rather coming to peace with it, while appropriately owning the second might involve feeling regret or dismay and resolving to get rid of it. (The last three paragraphs draw on Whitcomb *et al* 2019.)

**2. Thomistic faith**

Aquinas’s view of faith is well-trod territory. In what follows, we do not intend to get embroiled in scholarly textual disputes about it. Rather, we intend to articulate a view that has a significant even if disputable basis in Aquinas’s writings and that is recognizably Thomistic, in the way that a view might be recognizably Augustinian, Cartesian, or Humean even though it has a significant but disputable basis in their writings.

 According to Aquinas, the object of faith is God, but since we have no immediate awareness of God, strictly speaking the object of faith is propositions about God, such as the proposition that God exists or the proposition that Jesus is God incarnate (ST II-II. q.1. a.1-2). Faith, then, is an act of intellectual assent to propositions about God. Many contemporary commentators call this act of intellectual assent “belief”; we will follow suit. Notably, Aquinas says that faith shares important features with both (i) high-grade knowledge (*scientia*), such as a mathematician’s knowledge of first principles and their knowledge of theorems based on demonstrations from those principles, and (ii) mere opinion, suspicion, and doubt (*opinione, suspicione et dubitatione*), such as our mere opinion that Trump’s campaign conspired with the Russians, our suspicion that there is extra-terrestrial sentient life, and our doubt about whether the number of kayakers on Pearrygin Lake this century will be even. Like knowledge, faith requires psychological certainty, and so no doubt; a view echoed by, among others, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: “doubt cannot coexist with faith…; faith and doubt are mutually exclusive”. Like mere opinion, suspicion, and doubt, the evidence for faith is inadequate for belief, in two senses. First, the evidence for faith is causally inadequate to move someone’s intellect to belief since the evidence for faith is only enough to move their intellect to mere opinion, suspicion, or doubt (ST II-II. q.4. a.1). Second, the evidence for faith is justificatorily inadequate for belief since the evidence for faith is only enough to justify intellectual acts such as mere opinion, suspicion or doubt and not belief. Nevertheless, someone can have faith that a proposition about God is true since they might be so attracted to its being true that their will moves their intellect to believe it is true even though their intellect alone could not be moved by the evidence to believe it (ST II-II q.1 a.4; cf. Hebrews 11:1, #558, and QDV q.14, a.2). And that is what faith is, says Aquinas: believing a proposition about God, on inadequate evidence, by an act of will due to an attraction to its being true.

Aquinas also distinguishes virtuous faith from faith lacking virtue. On his view, if someone is attracted to the truth of a religious proposition out of a love (*caritas*) of God or a love of what is in fact the goodness of God, then, if they believe it by an act of will, their faith is virtuous; otherwise, it is not (ST II-II. q.4. a.3-5). But this isn’t quite right since, by Aquinas’s lights, faith is virtuous only if what evidence one has for it is testimonial, e.g. hearing the word of God (ST II-II. q.4. a.8). Finally, a person can be saved, says Aquinas, only if they have virtuous faith. (For extended discussion of the relationship between faith and salvation, see Stump 2003, chapters 12 and 15.) So, for example, if Valerie is attracted to the truth of the basic Christian story out of love of God or the goodness of God presented in the basic Christian story, then, if she believes it by an act of will, her faith is virtuous and so salvific, whereas if Victor is attracted to the truth of the basic Christian story solely out of a desire to avoid hell, then, if he believes it by an act of will, his faith is not virtuous and so not salvific.

We have several objections to Aquinas’s view about what faith is and when it is virtuous. As for what faith is, we deny that faith can only take God or religious propositions as objects. Obviously enough, spouses, friends, children, and one’s self, among other non-religious things, can be objects of faith, as can propositions that are not about God. Moreover, even if the will and an attraction to the truth of a proposition figure in faith somehow, one can have faith that it is true even if one’s faith is not caused by an act of will due to an attraction to its truth. As for when faith is a virtue, one’s faith in relation to one’s intimates can be virtuous even if what evidence one has to go on is non-testimonial, as when a mother puts her faith in her son or two friends have faith that their friendship will endure a crisis. Further, if you put your faith in someone else, you may well be attracted to them coming through for you with respect to what you’ve put your faith in them. But, in order for your faith in them to be virtuous, your attraction need not be motivated by love (caritas) of them or their goodness; any number of other positive motivations might do. For example, if we put our faith in Dr. Huber as a dentist, we may well be attracted to her coming through for us as a dentist, but our faith in her can be virtuous even if our attraction is motivated solely by a desire for a healthy doctor-patient relationship, one that need not involve love of her or anyone or anything else.

It’s little wonder, then, that all the details of Aquinas’s view of faith have found little traction in contemporary pistology. Even so, the core of the view has found some traction. It is this core that we will call

*Thomistic faith*. For someone to have faith is for them to believe something with certainty on inadequate evidence.

Others agree that this is what faith is. According to the New Atheists, “faith is belief in the absence of evidence,” or “believing something without good reasons,” or “belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence” (Rosenberg 2013, Pinker 2006, Dawkins 1992). Sam Newlands says: “A lot of people think of faith as having a kind of belief commitment that something is going to be certain, or that something is going to be probable, that maybe outstrips the evidence” (2015). According to Robert Pasnau: “To hold a belief on faith is to hold it firmly and to attach a high credence to it even though one does not suppose that the evidence warrants such confidence”; those with faith, “adhere to their firm convictions even while maintaining a self-consciously grown-up awareness of how poor the evidence is” (2017, 135). It seems, then, that Thomistic faith has some purchase on thinkers as diverse as these.

Notice that Thomistic faith is a cognitive attitude, not a character trait; when instantiated, it takes a specific proposition as its object, not all or nearly all propositions with respect to which one has faith, as we would expect of a trait. Even so, we can ask what character trait would correlate with it. On the personal worth theory that we are presupposing in this paper, it would be this:

*Thomistic faith as a character trait*. For a person to have faith as a character trait is for them to be disposed to consistently believe things with certainty on inadequate evidence, and to do so because of their stable motivations and values.

Two questions arise. (i) Could such a character trait be a virtue? (ii) How would it relate to humility?

(i) It is difficult to see how it could be an *intellectual* virtue. A character trait is an intellectual virtue only if it is grounded in a strong desire for epistemic goods such as truth, knowledge, understanding, and justified belief. But anyone with a strong desire for such goods will be ill-served by such a trait. That’s because a disposition to consistently believe things with certainty on inadequate evidence lends itself to falsehood, ignorance, misunderstanding, and unjustified belief. Thomistic faith as a character trait, therefore, conflicts with the motivations and values appropriate to intellectual virtue.

(ii) Thomistic faith as a trait would conflict with the virtue of humility in the domain of inquiry, for at least two reasons.

First, we are often in no position to settle a matter that’s important to us because our cognitive powers are not up to the task or we have yet to exercise them to gain enough evidence to form a reasonable opinion. The virtue of humility counsels us to be appropriately attentive to, and to own, our intellectual limitations, including a lack of evidence, and so to refrain from believing in such cases. Not so with Thomistic faith as a character trait. If we are stably disposed to consistently believe on inadequate evidence, then we will be less likely to be attentive to our intellectual limitations including our lack of evidence or, when we are attentive to them, we will be less likely to own them and respond appropriately by not believing, and so less likely to avoid falsehoods.

Second, Thomistic faith as a trait stably disposes us not just to *believe* on inadequate evidence but to believe *with certainty*. Beliefs accompanied by certainty are more difficult to dislodge. Thus, if we have this disposition, once having believed something, it will not only have made it more likely that we believe a falsehood, it will make it more likely that we *retain* a falsehood. Since we frequently meet inadequate evidence in our inquiries, and since we sometimes err and believe on inadequate evidence, we will be stably disposed to crowd our minds with difficult-to-dislodge falsehoods. Not so with the virtue of humility. If we are stably disposed to appropriately attend to and own our intellectual limitations, then, if we believe something on inadequate evidence, we will be more likely to be aware of it, and we will be more likely to change our minds rather than dig in with certainty.

In light of these two points, the inquirer with both the trait of Thomistic faith and the virtue of humility would be pulled in incompatible directions. They would be pulled toward believing on inadequate evidence and not; and, when believing on inadequate evidence, they would be pulled toward believing with certainty and not.

Thomistic faith as a character trait, therefore, is not an intellectual virtue and, in the domain of inquiry, it conflicts with humility as a virtue. Later we will argue that it is not a relational virtue either and that, in the domain of personal relationships, it conflicts with humility as a virtue.

**3. Markan faith**

We turn to an older account of faith, one rooted in ancient Greco-Roman thought and practice, as well as ancient Jewish and early Christian thought and practice (Morgan 2015; McKaughan 2017). We could name it any number of things, but we will call it *Markan faith* because the characters of *The Gospel According to Mark* exhibit it so well, e.g. Jairus, the friends of the paralytic, blind Bartimaeus, the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophoenican woman, the woman at Bethany, the father of the demon-possessed son, and Jesus, especially in his relationship with the twelve disciples, as well as in his prayer in Gethsemane and his cry of dereliction on Golgotha (Howard-Snyder 2017). However, before we introduce the account, we must draw an important distinction.

Sometimes we have faith *that* something is true, as when a father has faith that his daughter will flourish in adulthood, despite adolescent evidence to the contrary. Call this *propositional faith*. On other occasions, we put or maintain faith *in* someone, or some property or event involving them, as when a man puts his faith in a woman, as his wife, or soldiers put their faith in another, as their commander. Call this *relational faith*. Relational faith paradigmatically inaugurates and perpetuates a relationship of mutual faith and faithfulness between people, one in which someone puts or maintains faith in another, as a thus-and-so, and the other responds with faithfulness to them, as a thus-and-so. We say “as a thus-and-so” because relational faith is relative to some things but not others, e.g., you might have faith in your children, as students, but not as horticulturalists. We distinguish propositional faith from relational faith because the older account of faith is, first and foremost, an account of relational faith, which will be our focus.

We will introduce the older account by contrast with what some experts regard as Aquinas’s view of relational faith (Stump 2003, 439-440; Swinburne 2005, 138-141). On this view, relational faith is a kind of *propositional* *belief*, something like the belief that the person in whom you have put your faith will deliver or come through for you with respect to what it is you have put your faith in them. We call this view

*Belief-Only*. For you to put or maintain faith in someone, as an *x*, is for you to *believe* that they *will* come through as an *x*.

On Belief-Only, for you to put your faith in Dr. Huber, as your dentist, is for you to believe that she will come through for you as a dentist. Notice that, unlike Thomistic faith, Belief-Only wisely removes the idea of believing with certainty on inadequate evidence. Even so, four concerns remain.

First, you can believe that someone will deliver as an *x* even if you do not want them to and you think it is undesirable or bad that they do; but you lack faith in that case. That’s why you would never put your faith in Timothy McVeigh, as a terrorist, even if you believed that he will deliver as one. That’s why you would never have faith in Satan, as a devil, even if you believed that he comes through all too well on that score. You are against terrorism and devilry; you regard them as undesirable or bad. Faith involves a *positive conative-evaluative posture* toward its object.

Second concern: you can believe that someone will deliver as an *x*, and even want them to and think it’s a good thing, without being disposed to rely on them as an *x*; but you lack faith in that case. In this connection, imagine Jesus calling someone to follow him. Suppose they regard following him as desirable, and they even want to follow him. Yet, due to the demands of discipleship—e.g., relinquishing attachment to wealth, status, power, autonomy, and the like—they are conflicted and so, perhaps due to weakness of will, they walk away. They lack faith in Jesus *as Lord* since they are not disposed to rely on him *as Lord*. Another illustration: you might well believe that your neighbor is a fine wife, and you might even be for it and think it’s a good thing; however, you do not have faith in them *as a wife* since you are not disposed to rely on them, *as a wife*, in contrast with their husband. In short, if you have faith in someone, as an *x*, then you will be *disposed to rely on them*, as an *x*.

To set up our third concern, we submit that to theorize about what faith is we might usefully reflect on what makes faith valuable, notably the role that it plays in forming and maintaining relationships of *mutual faith and faithfulness*. Ryan Preston-Roedder (2018) observes three sources of value. First, when you put your faith in someone, as a spouse, or a friend, or the like, you are more likely to see and appreciate their potential and value in these capacities. Second, when you put your faith in someone, in a certain capacity, they are more likely to live up to your favorable view of them because your approval of and reliance on them gives them additional reason to come through for you in that capacity. Third, when you put your faith in someone, there’s a sense in which you cast your lot with them; you make yourself vulnerable to them and you rely on them to respond faithfully. If they do respond faithfully, the result is a sort of solidarity, a solidarity that can increase when they reciprocate the faith you have put in them by putting their faith in you, and you respond faithfully. These observations make sense of Teresa Morgan’s claim that, in the ancient Greco-Roman world, faith played a crucial role in forming and maintaining relationships of mutual faith and faithfulness “at every socio-economic level,” “relationships of wives and husbands, parents and children, masters and slaves, patrons and clients, subjects and rulers, armies and commanders, friends, allies, fellow-human beings, gods and worshippers, and even fellow-animals” (2015, 120).

Now to our third concern. Putting your faith in someone can help to promote and sustain valuable relationships in these three ways *only if* it is at least somewhat resilient in the face of challenges of various sorts. By way of illustration, unless the faith you put in your spouse can withstand the strains of marriage, your faith in them won’t make these valuable things more likely. If you are disposed to pack your bags and head out the door at the first sign of them not delivering as a spouse, your “faith” in them will not make it more likely that you will see them as a spouse favorably, or that they will see themselves as a spouse favorably and act accordingly, or that you both experience marital solidarity. Nor will the relationship benefit from ways that resilient reliance itself contributes to stability and security (McKaughan 2017).

Fourth concern: you can put your faith in someone, as an *x*, even if you lack belief that they will deliver as an *x*. That’s not to say that you can *dis*believe it and still have faith. Faith involves a more positive cognitive attitude than that. Still, faith need not involve *belief* that they *will* deliver as an *x*, for at least two reasons (cp. Howard-Snyder 2018).

(1) According to Belief-Only, you have faith in someone, as an *x*, only if you *believe* that they will deliver as an *x*. No other type of attitude will do. Not seeming, not credence, not trust, not acceptance, not beliefless assuming. Only belief is allowed. Moreover, according to Belief-Only, when belief is the positive cognitive attitude that you have while you have faith in someone, as an *x*, the content of that belief must be that they *will* deliver as an *x*. No “thinner” content will do: not that *it’s likely that* they will deliver, not that *it’s more likely than not*, not that *there’s a good enough chance to risk putting your faith in them*, and so on for a long list of ineligible “thinner” propositions. Only the “thick” proposition that they *will* deliveris allowed. The sheer implausibility of requiring exactly one attitude-type and exactly one content counts against Belief-Only, especially since other attitude-types and “thinner” contents can sustain the role of faith in a well-lived life.

(2) The role of faith in a well-lived life is to render you resilient in the face of challenges to relying on those in whom you repose faith, and faith serves this role partly by responding to new evidence against their not coming through. While new counterevidence might induce doubt about whether they will come through, faith tends to help keep you from being deterred or disheartened into inaction, it tends to help keep you behaviorally on track. By way of illustration, consider a case of faith *in oneself*. Imagine “a first-generation college student—a child of Mexican immigrants—who discovers, upon entering college, that many of her classmates and teachers hold rather dim views of Hispanic students’ drive and intellectual ability” (Preston-Roedder, 2018, 175). Suppose these dim views constitute new counterevidence to her belief that she will succeed as a student, and suppose it is strong enough to induce belief-cancelling doubt about the matter. If she has sufficient faith in herself, as a student, her resilience in the face of this counterevidence might help her to overcome the otherwise debilitating effects of her doubt, e.g., by helping her to keep her nose in the books, by motivating her to say ‘no’ to extracurricular temptations, etc. rather than throwing in the towel. Her faith in herself, as a student, would not help her in this way if it required her to *believe* that she *will* succeed. Due to its belief-condition, Belief-Only cannot account for faith’s role when counterevidence produces severe doubt.

If we wish to avoid these concerns about Belief-Only in our theorizing about faith, we will be led to

*Markan faith*. For you to put or maintain faith in a person, as an *x*, is for you

1. to have a positive cognitive attitude toward their delivering as an *x*,
2. to have a positive conative-evaluative posture toward their delivering as an *x*,
3. to be disposed to rely on them as an *x*, and
4. to be resilient in the face of challenges to relying on them as an *x*.

How does Markan faith differ from trust? Mainly, as follows: while both necessarily involve reliance, only faith necessarily involves resilience.

Notice that Markan faith is a complex attitude, not a character trait; when someone instantiates it, it takes a specific person as its object, not all or nearly all of those in whom one reposes faith, as we would expect of a trait. Even so, we can ask what trait would correlate with it. It would take us too far afield to explain our answer to this question and so, without argument, we identify *resilience* as the central defining feature of Markan faith, which we understand as a disposition to overcome challenges to continuing to perform actions that achieve your aims (Battaly 2017; King 2014). Thus we have:

*Markan faith as a character trait*. For someone to have faith as a character trait is for them to be disposed to overcome challenges to relying on those in whom they repose faith, and to do so because of their stable motivations and values.

This view fits well with Teresa Morgan’s repeated observation that, in the Greco-Roman world, faith was a “social virtue” drawn on in times of crisis because it enabled people to overcome the “fear, doubt, and skepticism” that threatened their relationships of mutual faith and faithfulness (Morgan 2015, 7, 117, 120, 121). Moreover, it helps explain why the Greeks and Romans deified faith as *Pistis*/*Fides*. Furthermore, it fits well with faith as understood and practiced in the early churches, and as exhibited in *The Gospel According to Mark*, about which Christopher Marshall—the foremost expert on the theme of faith in that Gospel—wrote: “Without doubt, the leading characteristic of Markan faith is sheer dogged perseverance” (1989, 237).

Now: as we said earlier, not all character traits are virtues, and Markan faith is no exception, for two reasons.

First, someone might be stably disposed to overcome challenges to relying on those in whom they repose faith but lack the virtue of faith because they lack good judgement. Imagine a woman suffering from battered-wife syndrome who maintains great faith in her husband, consistently overcoming challenges to relying on him in a variety of ways—when she shouldn’t, contrary to good judgment. If this disposition generally characterizes the faith she puts in others, she lacks the virtue of faith. You might say she has too much faith, faith to a fault, faith in excess. She doesn’t give up when she should. As a result, the trait of faith in her exhibits intransigence. For most of us, however, intransigence is not a problem. Rather, we are prone to give up too readily, give up when we shouldn’t. Our friend doesn’t return our calls; our neighbor lets their dog out too early in the morning; our religious congregation questions a policy we favor strongly—and so, contrary to good judgement, we withdraw, we no longer rely on them for friendship, neighborliness, and community. If this disposition generally characterizes the faith we put in others, we lack the virtue of faith. You might say we have too little faith, a deficiency of faith. As a result, our faith exhibits irresolution. The trait of Markan faith is a virtue only if you are neither *over*disposed nor *under*disposed to overcoming challenges to relying on those in whom you repose faith, neither disposed toward intransigence nor disposed toward irresolution.

Second, someone might be stably disposed to overcome challenges to relying on those in whom they repose faith and regularly exercise good judgment but lack the virtue of faith because their disposition is grounded in bad motivations and values. Imagine an ambitious young priest who learns that archbishops must have faith as a trait, and so they embark on a regimen to gain it. In due course, they succeed, and they also develop good judgment about who to put faith in, and when and for what. Even though they have the trait of faith, they lack the virtue since their stable disposition to overcome challenges to relying on others in whom they repose faith is grounded in hunger for ecclesiastical power and its privileges.

Upshot: as a *virtue*, Markan faith is a disposition to *appropriately* overcome challenges to relying on those in whom one reposes faith, as the context demands.

**4. Markan faith and humility in the intellectual domain**

Earlier we asked whether Thomistic faith as a trait (i) could be an intellectual virtue and (ii) how it would relate to the virtue of humility in the domain of inquiry. We now ask the same two questions about Markan faith.

(i) Markan faith as a trait can be an intellectual virtue since anyone who values epistemic goods will be well-served by it, provided they use good judgement in its exercise.

In this connection, consider the project of human inquiry, which aims to gain truth, knowledge, and understanding about the world, ourselves, and our place in the world. We participate in this project well only when we work together. That’s because it is no easy task to achieve its aims, especially regarding matters we care about deeply, matters related to the STEM disciplines as well as the human sciences, the humanities, the arts, and the law, among other things. Inquiry is demanding. Success is more likely if we work together—learning from each other and our predecessors, teaching the next generation, collaborating on projects, critiquing and improving each other’s work, and so on—all of which requires a disposition to rely on each other, as fellow inquirers. Of course, our fellows can let us down. But unless we are at least somewhat disposed to stick with them even when they let us down, we will be less likely in the long run to achieve our goal. This does not mean that if a researcher, or a research group, or even an entire discipline *regularly* lets us down, e.g. by routinely falsifying data or routinely excluding feasible viewpoints, we should stick with them come hell or high water. We need to exercise good judgment. But absent any disposition to *appropriately* overcome challenges to relying on our fellow inquirers, we will be less likely to achieve the epistemic goods at which we aim by participating in the project of human inquiry.

Of course, we care about epistemic goods in domains other than the grand project of human inquiry. Take, for example, journalism. We want to know the truth about important current affairs, at home and abroad. Clearly enough, we rely on others to be informed—editors, investigators, reporters, photographers, eyewitnesses, technicians, etc.—and, clearly enough, absent any disposition to overcome challenges to relying on them for information, we will be less likely to achieve the truth we seek. This does not mean that we should ignore challenges to the reliability of certain journalists and media outlets; rather, it means that we should exercise good judgement in deciding who to stick with for what and for how long. Something similar can be said about healthcare, the judicial system, the military, meteorology, finance, real estate, wilderness management, and many other domains of human life.

(ii) It seems that Markan faith as a virtue would relate well to the virtue of humility in the domain of inquiry.

First, in general, Markan faith as a virtue facilitates the successful exercise of other intellectual virtues. Consider curiosity, for example, a disposition to wonder, ponder, and ask questions with an eye toward gaining understanding. Or consider intellectual autonomy, a disposition to think things through for oneself, or fairmindedness, a disposition to consider the merits of opposing views with equanimity, or intellectual carefulness, a disposition to avoid errors and foster accuracy, or intellectual thoroughness, a disposition to investigate broadly and deeply in the quest for understanding. For each of these virtues, you can exercise it only if you *rely on* the cognitive abilities that constitute it; furthermore, unless you are appropriately *resilient* in the face of challenges to relying on those constitutive abilities, you will be less likely than you otherwise would be to gain the epistemic goods at which the virtue aims.

And the same goes for humility. You can exercise humility only if you *rely on* the cognitive abilities that constitute it, both the ability to perceive your limitations and the ability to own your limitations. Furthermore, unless you are appropriately *resilient* in the face of challenges to relying on those abilities, you will be less likely than you otherwise would be to gain the truth, knowledge, and understanding at which humility aims. Having faith in yourself, as an intellectually humble person, facilitates the successful exercise of humility. More generally, having faith in yourself, as an intellectually virtuous person, facilitates the exercise of your intellectual virtues.

Next, consider two other ways in which Markan faith as a virtue would relate well to the virtue of humility in the domain of inquiry. First, humble people will be aware of their intellectual limitations and, for some of them, such awareness will reveal *many* limitations. If they have faith in themselves, as inquirers, it can help buck them up in the face of an otherwise daunting host of limitations; it can help direct their minds to their many strengths as inquirers as well past successes in inquiry; it can help invigorate an “I can do this!” attitude. Second, when you put your faith in someone, it’s typically someone *else* you put your faith in. Thus, when humility reveals your limitations, faith would typically direct you to rely on others with resilience to help you fill in the gaps in your knowledge, to lend a technical hand, to add or hone a skill, and so on.

**5. Thomistic faith, Markan faith, and humility in the domain of personal relationships**

Markan faith as a trait would also relate well to the virtue of humility in the domain of personal relationships, whether human-human or divine-human.

As for human-human relationships, not infrequently, we find ourselves needing to rely on others to come through for us on matters of importance to us, especially in areas of our lives where we recognize our own deficiencies.

By way of illustration, consider a marriage in which each partner brings different strengths and limitations to the relationship. Suppose one partner is incompetent at managing finances, while the second is competent. If the first partner is virtuously humble, they will be disposed to recognize and own this limitation of theirs, and if they have faith in their partner, they will be disposed to rely on them, as a financial manager, and to appropriately overcome challenges to relying on them in this capacity, e.g. continuing to rely on them despite a minor mistake in the budget or a penalty from an unpaid bill. Further, suppose the second partner is significantly less able than the first to provide the empathy, perspective, and emotional support that their teenage child needs. If the second partner is virtuously humble, they will be disposed to recognize and own this limitation of theirs, and if they have faith in their partner, they will be disposed to rely on them, as the more emotionally switched-on parent, and appropriately overcome challenges to relying on them in this capacity, e.g. when they occasionally fail to meet their teenager’s emotional needs. Of course, there are many other ways in which limitations-owning can dovetail with resilient reliance to enhance a marriage and family life. To the extent that each partner is faithful to the other with respect to that which the other is relying on them, a successful marriage and family life seems more likely than it otherwise would be.

Also, in human-human relationships, appropriately relying on someone can be an aid to becoming more virtuously humble. By way of illustration, when you put your faith in a partner, friend, or therapist, as a confidant, and in doing so you rely on them for honesty about defects in your deep self, you rely on them to be discrete and to hold you accountable. By providing you with a safe, supportive relationship for you to work through your deficiencies, you may well be more likely to recognize and own your laziness, narcissism, selfishness, and other vices, so as to enhance the process of personal growth needed to help you flourish as an individual and in your other relationships.

We suspect that these two observations generalize. Generally speaking, humility and faith, virtuously exercised, make human-human relationships more likely to flourish. What holds for marriage and family life, and for therapeutic relationships, also holds for a wide variety of other relationships between parents, children, lovers, colleagues, neighbors, business partners, commanders and soldiers, leaders and citizens, employers and employees, and many other worthwhile social relationships.

How might Thomistic faith as a character trait fare in the domain of human-human relations, and how might it relate to humility? There are many ways in which a tendency to believe something with certainty on inadequate evidence will not serve relationships well. For example, if our first marriage partner described above forms and persists in the belief that they are a competent financial manager, despite their evidence, and if the second one forms and persists in the belief that they are an emotionally switched-on parent, despite their evidence, and if both of them are stably disposed to believe with certainty on inadequate evidence in other ways pertinent to their marriage and family life, then they are more likely to misrepresent their relationship with each other and with their child in ways that would worsen those relationships. Furthermore, just like in the domain of inquiry, a stable disposition to believe with certainty on inadequate evidence and a stable disposition to own limitations relevant to a personal relationship pull in different, incompatible directions. When we think about someone in a personal relationship *and hold the first disposition fixed in our thinking about them*, they would at best only sporadically own their limitations since they would be stably disposed to misrepresent themselves to themselves.

Let’s now turn to humility and faith in a divine-human relationship. Any attempt to explain how they would relate to each other will be tradition-bound. We choose Abrahamic religion. On that tradition, humans tend to fail in multiple ways: we don’t live up to our own moral ideals, we seek our own power and interest over the general good, we squander our natural and God-given talents, we neglect to steward creation well, and by acts of commission and omission we undermine the establishment of a peaceful, just, and harmonious global community. These and other failures are at odds with God’s purposes. Consequently, we are alienated from God, and we are alienated from each other. At our best, we are aware of our failings and we own them, with regret and an intention to improve. But improvement is difficult, fraught with setbacks, uncooperativeness, greed, malaise, disrespect, and a thousand other impediments. Left to our own devices, failure is not only our past, it is our future as well. Fortunately, God has not left us to our own devices. God has provided a way to be reconciled with God and, as a consequence, a way to be reconciled with each other. Different Abrahamic traditions tell different stories about what that way is. But the stories share in common the idea that human beings individually and collectively can align themselves with God’s way by maintaining faith in God, relying with resilience on God and God’s way, to help us undo the alienation that characterizes our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. On Abrahamic religion, therefore, humility enables us to see and own our failures and alienation, while faith enables us to align ourselves with God’s way of reconciliation. Humility dovetails with Markan faith.

It is difficult to see how Thomistic faith would fit well into this general picture. Just one illustration. Suppose we were generally stably disposed to believe with certainty on inadequate evidence. In that case, we would be more likely to incorrectly view our failings, either by believing that we are worse off than the evidence warrants or by believing that we are better off than the evidence warrants. Moreover, having formed these false beliefs, we would hold them with certainty, and so we would be more likely to retain them. As a consequence, we would be less likely to see ourselves aright, and so more likely not to own them appropriately, whether by being too disheartened by an overly negative view of ourselves or by being too unperturbed by an overly positive view of ourselves. Either way, a precondition of God’s way of reconciliation—namely, our seeing ourselves aright—would be less likely to be satisfied. So it is that Thomistic faith would be at odds with humility, and how humility serves God’s purposes in reconciliation.

**6. Conclusion**

We acknowledge that in this chapter we have focused on (i) how resilient reliance dovetails with limitations-owning to promote the aims of inquiry and personal relationships and on (ii) how believing on inadequate evidence with certainty is at odds with limitations-owning in the domains of inquiry and personal relationships. Perhaps, then, we will be charged with the fallacy of selective evidence. In response, we invite the friend of Thomistic faith to exhibit (i) how resilient reliance is at odds with limitations-owning in the domains of inquiry and personal relationships, and (ii) how believing on inadequate evidence with certainty dovetails with limitations-owning to promote the aims of inquiry and personal relationships. Until the friends of Thomistic faith accept our invitation, and deliver on it, we tentatively conclude that while Thomistic faith conflicts with humility, Markan faith is in concord with it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**References**

Aquinas, Thomas. 1265-74/1981. *Summa Theologiae, Part II-II (Secunda Secundae)* Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1911. Reprinted by Reprinted by New York: Benziger 1947–48 and Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981). <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews* (*Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Hebraeos lectura*). Translated by Fabian R. Larcher, O.P. Scripture text: VIVES & RSV. Html-formated by Joseph Kenny, O.P. <https://dhspriory.org/thomas/SSHebrews.htm>.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Truth* (*Quaestiones disputatae De veritate*), q. 14 ("On faith"). Translated by Robert W. Mulligan, J. V. McGlynn, and R. W. Schmidt (3 vols., Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952–54). <https://dhspriory.org/thomas/QDdeVer14.htm>.

Baehr, Jason. 2011. *The Inquiring Mind*. New York: Oxford.

Battaly, Heather. 2015. *Virtue*. Malden, MA: Polity.

Battaly, Heather. 2017. “Intellectual Perseverance”. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 14, pp. 669-697.

Dawkins, Richard. 1992. “A scientist’s case against God” *The Independent*, April 20.

Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 2017. “Markan Faith”. In Rebekah Rice, Daniel McKaughan, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds) *Approaches to Faith*. New York: Springer, pp. 31-60.

Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 2018. “Three Arguments to Think that Faith Does Not Entail Belief”. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12237>.

King, Nathan. 2014. “Erratum to: ‘Perseverance as an Intellectual Virtue’,” Synthese 191, pp. 3779-3801.

Marshall, Christopher. 1989. *Faith as a Theme in Mark’s Narrative*. New York: Cambridge.

McKaughan, Daniel. 2017. “On the Value of Faith and Faithfulness”. In Rebekah Rice, Daniel McKaughan, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds) *Approaches to Faith*. New York: Springer, pp. 7-29.

Morgan, Teresa. 2015. *Roman Faith and Christian Faith:* Pistis *and* Fides *in the Early Roman Empire and the Early Churches*. New York: Oxford.

Newlands, Samuel. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-b5Hiijc4bU>.

Pasnau, Robert. 2017. *After Certainty*. New York: Oxford.

Pinker, Steven. 2006. “Less Faith, More Reason.” *The Harvard Crimson*. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2006/10/27/less-faith-more-reason-there-is>.

Preston-Roedder, Ryan. 2018. “Three Varieties of Faith”. *Philosophical Topics* 46, pp. 173–199.

Rosenberg, Alex. 2013. Is Faith in God Reasonable? Debate: Alex Rosenberg vs. William Lane Craig. <http://open.biola.edu/resources/is-faithin-god-reasonable>.

Stump, Eleonore. 2003. Aquinas. New York: Routledge.

Swinburne, Richard. 2005. Faith and Reason, 2nd edition. New York: Oxford.

Whitcomb, Dennis, and Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder. 2017. “Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94, pp. 509-539.

Whitcomb, Dennis, and Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder. 2019. “The Puzzle of Humility and Disparity”. In Mark Alfano, Michael Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*. New York: Routledge, pp. xxx-xxx.

1. We thank audiences at the Free University, Amsterdam, and the University of Arkansas. We especially thank Alessandra Tanesini and Dennis Whitcomb for extensive critically constructive comments. This publication was supported by a grant from The John Templeton Foundation. The views expressed in it are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The John Templeton Foundation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)