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HUMILITY'S INNER DIMENSION - A SEARCH FOR INTRINSIC VALUE

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Abstract

In their paper, "Humility and Epistemic Goods," Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood classify the intellectual virtue of humility in terms of its instrumental value such that humility becomes a component promoting truth and other epistemic goods. Roberts and Wood see humility as a good that is always working insofar as it relates epistemic knowers to each other and facilitates the pursuit of truth. Essentially, Roberts and Wood envision a kind of humility that aims towards certain intellectual ends. Central to their argument is a two-tier structure of epistemic humility, where humility helps the individual who possesses it, as well as promoting a social function. In this system, humility is on both levels instrumental. However, I argue that, from the basic frame Roberts and Wood give, there is a way of teasing out an intrinsic dimension to the virtue of humility if we analyse the first of the two tiers closely. I argue that there is a way of imagining a non-social, or at least an inner, kind of humility, a comportment towards the self as a knower that can give intrinsic value to the virtue. In the inner dimension of humility, we see the self as epistemically flawed and prone to mistake. Humility, in the internal sense, is the recognition of this truth. With such a shift, the instrumental value is not lost; it is simply to say that humility has both intrinsic and instrumental dimensions, and that the intrinsic dimension derives from a comportment towards the self as a flawed knower.

In their paper, "Humility and Epistemic Goods," Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood classify the intellectual virtue of humility in terms of its instrumental value such that humility becomes a component promoting truth and other epistemic goods. Roberts and Wood see humility as a good that is always working insofar as it relates epistemic knowers to each other and facilitates the pursuit of truth. Essentially, Roberts and Wood envision a kind of humility that aims towards certain intellectual ends; they lay the groundwork for finding instrumental value in the virtue of humility. Central to their argument is a two-tier structure of epistemic humility, where humility helps the individual who possesses it, as well as promoting a social function (Roberts and Wood 272). In this system, humility is on both levels instrumental. However, I argue that, from the basic frame Roberts and Wood give, there is a way of teasing out an intrinsic dimension to the virtue of humility if we analyse the first of the two tiers closely. I argue that there is a way of imagining a non-social, or at least an inner, kind of humility, a comportment towards the self as a knower that can give intrinsic value to the virtue. In the inner dimension of humility, we see the self as epistemically flawed and prone to mistake. Humility, in the internal sense, is the recognition of this truth. With such a shift, the instrumental value is not lost; it is simply to say that humility has both intrinsic and instrumental dimensions, and that the intrinsic dimension derives from a comportment towards the self as a flawed knower.

To begin, I will take up Roberts and Wood's definition of humility, working through both

their negative and positive definitions. I will then focus in on the first tier of their structure of epistemic humility, namely how humility relates to the knower themselves. Third, I will focus heavily on rereading the examples of G.E. Moore and Albert Schweitzer, shifting towards an internal dimension of humility. In doing so, I will offer a broadened definition of humility that encompasses the internal dimension. I will end by offering two ways of thinking about the intrinsic value of humility, focusing on epistemic credit and the humble life.

Roberts and Wood begin their analysis of humility through a series of negative definitions, positing it against vanity and arrogance as its primary corresponding vices. To address the first, vanity is “an excessive concern to be well regarded by other people, and thus a hypersensitivity to the view others take of oneself” (Riggs and Wood 259). Under this view, vanity is two-fold. First, it is to be overly concerned with status insofar as it is conferred by other agents.¹ Second, that sensitivity manifests itself in the taking on of others views of themselves. Here, the definition of vanity is dependent on the fact that it takes a certain palpable manifestation. It is not enough, Roberts and Wood argue, to simply have excessive concern to be well regarded. Logically, one must also show the effect of such concerns – this is what Roberts and Wood identify as hypersensitivity. The important aspect of vanity, however, is less the hypersensitivity itself and more the effect the hypersensitivity has on one's epistemic endeavours. It is clear that to be hypersensitive to the opinions of others would impair one's ability to effectively engage and find the truth. One way this might manifest is in a tailoring of one's work to the opinions of others so much so that it no longer resembles any clear effort at finding truth and is rather an effort to sway the opinion of those whose views one is hypersensitive to.² Vanity serves the purpose of instrumentally obstructing the effective pursuit of truth by creating barriers of status. Further, these barriers of status could lead the inquirer to inquire simply for the social status incurred in its pursuit, rather than for the sake of the inquiry itself.

The humble person, as opposed to the vain, does not fret over how they are received or regarded. They are concerned, epistemically speaking, with pursuing truth in an effective way. Moreover, their humility, according to Roberts and Wood, is not only about “unconcern” with their status, but an inattention to any value that might be placed on it (Roberts and Wood 261). As this relates to epistemic concerns, the knower can give an account of their status if asked, but cares little about what that status means; what concerns them is their inquiry, their pursuit of truth for its own sake.

A similar case is made for arrogance, the other vice to which humility is opposed. In this case, however, it is not hypersensitivity to the opinions of others, but rather an unwarranted opinion of the self that accompanies a disregard of the opinions of others. Here Roberts and Wood are explicit in their insistence on the fact that it is in the manifestation, rather than the belief, that the person is made to have that character. They write, “arrogance is a disposition to ‘infer’ some illicit entitlement claim from a supposition of one's superiority, and to *think, act, and feel* on the basis

1 There are objections to be made against Roberts and Wood here on the grounds of an implicitly sexist understanding of vanity that does not see the structurally enforced vanity that pervades our society. I do not have the space to argue for those concerns here, but it is important to consider the impact they have on the above notion.

2 An example of this might be a college student writing a paper in elaborate language to impress their professor, while all they do is obscure their point and inhibit an understanding of the truth.

of that claim” (Roberts and Wood 265, emphasis mine). Arrogance is not just the disposition but the consequent manifestation. It is important to distinguish here between the illicit conclusion and a superiority claim as such. The former derives from a logical inconsistency, the inference from superiority in a certain respect to superiority as such (Robert and Wood 266). The latter can simply be a claim about one's superiority in a certain respect, say in knowledge of ancient philosophy. The latter is what Roberts and Wood call a “self-estimate” (Robert and Wood 266). The case of Albert Schweitzer, who was superior in his own mind to many others, is one in which, Roberts and Wood argue, the belief in his superiority did not make him arrogant. Roberts and Wood do not say Schweitzer actually makes the illicit inference necessary for arrogance, but supposing he did, it would be precisely that inference that made him arrogant. This is a limited space, for Roberts and Wood; the inference must itself be illicit. Arrogance here comes not with the belief, but with the corresponding defect in (intellectual) action. The inference is made manifest in the “thinking, acting, and feeling” of the subject in reference to it. To make an inference that resulted in the *actual* disrespect of others by mere presumption of superiority was the mark of arrogance, not the belief established prior to this.

It is clear, in a similar manner, that arrogance is intellectually disruptive and thus epistemically bad. As Roberts and Wood correctly note, “arrogance includes a certain resistance to correction” (Roberts and Wood 267). This resistance translates easily onto the intellectual landscape. It is simply true that we will inevitably be wrong about something, even in our fields of expertise. The arrogant person does not assume this to be the case. It is difficult for them to see that as a plausible situation, and thus they are particularly liable to assume they are correct even in instances of blatant falsehood. Roberts and Wood continue to insist that it is not so much their belief in superiority that makes them arrogant, but the actions and inferences (intellectual or otherwise) that make them so. Thus, in the case of epistemic goods, arrogance is a vice in that it actively inhibits the pursuit of knowledge by setting up barriers to critique and advocating for the disregarding of other opinions. Again, in contrast, the humble person does not make the supposed superiority inference. The intellectually humble person, on this line of thinking, is one who would acknowledge the ability of others to be right, as well as opening themselves up to critique. They are in this sense poised to collegially acknowledge others' participation in the pursuit of truth. In this case, as has been shown before, humility by contrast is the virtue that is instrumentally crucial to the pursuit of knowledge.

The positive definition of humility Roberts and Wood give is instrumental and directly related to their discussion of arrogance. If arrogance is the disposition to make the superiority inference, then intellectual humility is “a disposition not to make unwarranted intellectual entitlement claims on the basis of one's (supposed) superiority or excellence” (Roberts and Wood 271). In this sense, the positive definition still negative: it is simply to not engage in the activity that is characteristic of intellectual arrogance. That is not the end of the story, however. In addition to being simply a disposition not to make the superiority inference, intellectual humility, in conjunction with other virtues, “fosters certain intellectual ends” (Roberts and Wood 271). Humility, through an escape from arrogance, is one of the means by which truth is pursued in an honest fashion. Moreover, an interesting turn is made by Roberts and Wood when they claim that humility is not just a virtue because of the epistemic advantages it affords. They claim that it is a virtue because, in terms of the “acquisition, maintenance, transmission, and application of knowledge,” a life lived humbly is better than a life lived without humility (Roberts and Wood 272). That is to say that having the

virtue of humility adds immediate benefit beyond the instrumental. The actual instrumental value is somewhat slim, according to Roberts and Wood; and yet we continue to assign humility more value than its instrumentality calls for, a sign that there is something more to it than the merely instrumental. The fact that a life characterized by humility, barring instrumental benefits, is better than one without is an indication of something of the intrinsic value of humility. It is to that question that we now turn.

The first challenge to the problem of intrinsic value is the social issue. Roberts and Wood seem to believe that humility is inherently a social virtue, meaning it is always working in relating two knowers or the knower to the community (Roberts and Wood 274). It is part of the virtue, they argue, that it works with the “acquisition, refinement, and communication of knowledge,” (Roberts and Wood 272) which is meant to occur in social settings like the classroom. Connected to this issue is the second problem, that of belief and manifestation. Roberts and Wood argue that the manifestation of the belief in concrete inferences or actions is the important component; however, the belief itself is left to rest. In order to understand humility fully, the belief itself must be questioned as well.

In order to see this, consider Roberts and Wood's analysis of Albert Schweitzer. If we suppose that he is superior with regard to “moral character, his learning, and his musicianship,” Roberts and Wood argue it follows that he is not arrogant (and thus implicitly humble) unless he is to make an unwarranted claim from his superiority to his disrespect of others. Thus, it is only in the social dimension of life, as well as in the manifestation of the belief, that Schweitzer could possibly be arrogant. This seems to me false, precisely because it does not map onto intellectual enterprises the way Roberts and Wood think it does. Schweitzer may not be arrogant with regards to the manifestation of his belief, but he is certainly not humble in having the belief itself, at least intellectually speaking. I am positing that the intellectual, concerned with inquiry, is never done or complete in their project. As it regards intellectual projects, and learning itself, it seems there is never a stage at which we stop learning, or a point in which we could not know more in a certain area of knowledge (e.g. ancient philosophy). Perhaps Schweitzer is more knowledgeable in the realms Roberts and Wood say he is, but it does not follow that his belief about that entails superiority. It is entirely possible that someone makes an offhand comment to Schweitzer that forces him to reevaluate his conceptions of what his knowledge constitutes. For example, if someone were to say something to Schweitzer that changed his perception of music (one of his areas of expertise), he would have more to learn. In essence, his relationship to the body of knowledge he claimed to be superior in knowing has shifted. Humility seems here to foster a certain openness to not simply correction, but an outright shift in their relationship to knowledge as such. What this means is that the internal dimension (the first tier of humility's structure) is not in itself removed from the debate of humility. How humility facilitates the knower's relationship to knowledge is not stagnant.

The example of G.E. Moore is another instance in which the internal dimension requires more scrutiny. In the case of Moore, it is not that his humility is due to an unconcern with status, but rather a deep, overshadowing concern with truth. Roberts and Wood state that, “status is ‘not an issue’ for Moore; to its exclusion, the truth about truth preoccupies him” (Roberts and Wood 263). His concern with truth does not result in self-effacement, but rather the anonymity of his voice. He is so unconcerned with status that, as Roberts and Wood note, criticisms of him could simply be criticisms of an anonymous philosopher who needs to be corrected (Roberts and Wood 263). What this means for a discussion of intellectual humility is that, if we take Moore as a paradigm,

the intellectually humble person is one who places the pursuit of truth first, whose unconcern with status is at the same time a removal of the self, such that the person becomes simply a medium by which truth is expressed.³ In these circumstances, the internal structure of humility becomes more visible. When the person sees themselves as a conduit for truth, the importance of their status fades into the background. Their fallibility is assumed, just as much as their ability to speak to the truth is assumed. To maintain the posture of a medium of truth is at the same time to maintain a posture of humility, insofar as such a posture recognizes the fallibility of the person. While this leads instrumentally to the better facilitation of truth among peers and in epistemic communities, the general value of this comportment seems intrinsic. It seems good in itself to view oneself as a conduit of truth rather than its possessor or its purveyor.

What we can take from the reading of Moore example corroborates our conclusions about Schweitzer. The two-tier structure of humility proposed by Roberts and Wood does not sufficiently cover the inner, cognitive structure. This leaves the question of intrinsic value open. The inner structure of humility does not immediately lend itself to intrinsic value, but there is a way of reading the above analysis as an entrance to an understanding of intrinsic value. Roberts and Wood, as shown above, hint at intrinsic value in their paper (Roberts and Wood 272). Perhaps the necessary component in understanding the intrinsic value of humility is what Wayne D. Riggs labels "epistemic credit."⁴ Riggs introduces this notion through a rethinking of how the knower relates to knowledge, somewhat analogous to our exploration of Moore. Epistemic credit can be conceived as a way of distinguishing between knowledge arrived at humbly, and knowledge arrived at using other means. Following Riggs, the humbly-pursued knowledge is inherently more valuable because of the way it was pursued, and that extra value is what we call "epistemic credit." Accordingly, the path the knower follows while in search of knowledge is of import in the evaluation of the knowledge, providing a means by which to distinguish humbly-pursued knowledge. Another way of thinking of intrinsic value for humility is to consider the value it lends to life separate from inquiry, that is to see the valuable pleasures constitutive of a good human life achieved only when humility is present. What the case of Moore tells us is that the virtue itself calls for, in terms of inquiry, the limited relevance of the self in the pursuit of knowledge. Seeing the self as simply a conduit of knowledge allows us to separate the value of humility from the inquiry itself. Humility then can lend itself to value in life separate from inquiry. There appears, then, a certain intrinsic value that humility in inquiry adds to the life of the person as such. Under the above analysis, assuming it is successful, it seems humility can be afforded a certain intrinsically valuable dimension by way of epistemic credit or looking at the value of a humble life apart from inquiry. The question of the intrinsic value of humility as an intellectual virtue can then remain open.

3 The implication of this claim is that the person forgets the self and the status such that they could not knowingly have the virtue described. The assumption here is that self-knowledge is a necessary prerequisite to possessing the virtues. It is not apparent to me that this is the case for humility. Take the instance in which someone says, "I am humble." It seems that to do this is to abrogate the very definition of humility we have been operating with. Humility is an odd virtue in that it seems that at the first indication of self-knowledge of the virtue, the virtue ceases to be present in that person. Whatever the case, the issue is not settled and for the sake of space, I cannot address it in detail here.

4 Riggs, "Reliability and the Value of Knowledge", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002): 93.

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