Introduction

> Had [George Washington] been merely humble, he would probably have shrunk back irresolute, afraid of trusting to himself the direction of an enterprise, on which so much depended.
>
> Mary Wollstonecraft (1996, 124)

> [H]umility . . . and the whole train of the monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose . . . ? We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices.
>
> David Hume (1994, 219/270)

> Lily would have liked to pay him a compliment; you're not humble, Mr. Bankes, she would have liked to have said. Virginia Woolf (1992)

Humility is a curious virtue with a checkered history. There is no dearth of portrayals of it throughout history, in literature, philosophy, theology, and art, yet there is little agreement about what exactly it would mean to be humble, and even less about whether it would be a good thing or not. If there is any general consensus to be found about its status as a virtue, it is its wholesale rejection as suggested in the quotes above. Lack of clarity on a definition for humility and humility's general rejection as a virtue are not, however, unconnected phenomena, for the former encourages the latter. Any defense of the virtue needs, then, to come to terms with confusions about its definition. Let's look at some of the ways that humility has been understood, and the associations it has acquired which have led to this impasse.

The most common strand of historical portrayals of humility presents the virtue as one associated with meekness, and a principled sense of one's inferiority. The figure of Griselda in Christine de Pizan's early fifteenth-century work, *Book of the City of Ladies*,[1] a figure to whom we shall return in our chapter 4 discussion of recent accounts of humility, is a paradigmatic

[1] de Pizan, 1982.

example of this sort of humility. Griselda is a peasant who is unexpectedly taken as the wife of a powerful Marquis. When her husband, as a test of her character, takes away her children, claiming that he will kill them (in fact, he sends them away to be cared for elsewhere), and then divorces her, Griselda's "humble" response is only the following:

> I have always known very well and often thought there could never be any comparison between your nobility and magnificence and my poverty, nor have I ever reputed myself worthy enough to be either your wife or your maid. (11.50.1/172)

When Griselda thus passes all these "tests," the Marquis reveals his deceptions to her, taking her on in a second marriage, and praising her specifically for the "great love, obedience and proven humility which you feel for me" (11.50.4). To gain this sort of praise for one's virtue, one must thus be willing to subordinate oneself to others, to reject one's own power of agency, and to admit that one is lesser than, inferior to, others.

We can go back even farther for such images of humility tied to inferiority, meekness, and loss of agency. St. Paul speaks of the need for humble women to wear coverings on their head "as a sign of authority" (1 Corinthians 11:3–11), and of their need to refrain from speaking publically (1 Corinthians 14:34–35). Centuries after Paul, Christian thinkers like St. Benedict and Bernard of Clairvaux continue the association of humility with inferiority, pushing it even further, toward a principled sense of one's worthlessness. Consider, for example, St. Benedict's striking articulation of Steps Six and Seven of the "steps of humility":

> The sixth degree of humility is that a monk be content with the poorest and worst of everything, and that in every occupation assigned him he consider himself a bad and worthless workman . . . The seventh degree of humility is that he consider himself lower and of less account than anyone else, and this not only in verbal protestation but also with the most heartfelt inner conviction, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet, 'But I am a worm and no man, the scorn of men and the outcast of the people.'[2]

Given its persistent associations with inferiority, powerlessness, and worthlessness, it's no surprise, then, that humility is a difficult virtue with which to come to terms. History records for us a variety of attempts to do so. The thinkers quoted at the opening of this introduction articulate the most common response to this history of humility: simply reject it. Humility "serves no manner of purpose" and reveals only a fault in one's character, an incapacity to engage in great actions. So abandon it.

[2] Benedict (St.), 1948, 27.

And although this seems to be the point where we find ourselves now, humility has not always been simply rejected. It has also been the most commonly falsified of the virtues. Instead of rejecting the admittedly onerous admissions of inferiority and worthlessness which it seems to demand, some seek to manipulate the perception of oneself as humble for their own purposes. And indeed it makes sense that one would be tempted to reap the benefits of humility – social admiration, even veneration – without really accepting one's actual worthlessness or inferiority.

Perhaps the most familiar figure of falsified humility is Uriah Heep from Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*.[3] Uriah repeatedly declares in a hypocritical and self-centered way that he is "so very 'umble" (Dickens, 1983, 311). When, for example, David suggests that Uriah, who works as an assistant to David's father-figure, Mr. Wickfield, must be "quite a great lawyer," Uriah protests "Oh, no! I'm a very 'umble person" (1983, 291). When David offers to teach him Latin, Uriah insists "I am sure it's very kind of you to make the offer, but I am much too 'umble to accept it." Even Uriah's body language expresses his lower state: "He had a way of writhing when he wanted to express enthusiasm, which was very ugly . . . snaky twistings of his throat and body" (1983, 292).

Although it is quite awhile before David identifies Uriah's writhings and protestations specifically as false humility, he knows from the very beginning that Uriah is shifty and not to be trusted. He says, for example, having just shaken hands with Uriah, that "his hand felt like a fish, in the dark" (1983, 293), and that being with Uriah left him with a sense of "uneasiness" (1983, 293). Agnes, David's childhood friend and daughter of Uriah's employer, Mr. Wickfield, is, however, the first to put words to the concern. She suspects that Uriah, while claiming to be an underling to her father, has actually begun to manipulate the latter's finances in his own favor. "'His ascendancy over papa,' said Agnes, 'is very great. He professes humility and gratitude – with truth, perhaps: I hope so – but his position is really one of power, and I fear he makes a hard use of his power'" (Dickens, 1983, 429). Agnes is, of course, right, and David himself eventually "fully comprehended . . . what a base, unrelenting, and revengeful spirit" Uriah actually was (1983, 639).

This false humility is a complex state, but Uriah himself explains it and its genesis better than anyone else could in response to queries from David:

[3] Dickens, 1983.

How little you think of the rightful 'umbleness of a person in my station, Master Copperfield! Father and me was both brought up at a foundation school for boys; and mother, she was likewise brought up at a public, sort of charitable, establishment. They taught us all a great deal of 'umbleness – not much else that I know of, from morning to night. We was to be 'umble to this person, and 'umble to that; and to pull off our caps here, and to make bows there; and always to know our place, and abase ourselves before our betters. And we had such a lot of betters! Father got the monitor-medal by being 'umble. So did I. Father got made a sexton by being 'umble. He had the character, among the gentlefolks, of being such a well-behaved man, that they were determined to bring him in. 'Be 'umble, Uriah,' says father to me, 'and you'll get on. It was what was always being dinned into you and me at school; it's what goes down best. Be 'umble,' says father, 'and you'll do!' And really it ain't done bad! (Dickens, 1983, 639)

Uriah has been raised in a culture which affirms the value of humility based in inferiority. But what he has learned by being raised this way is that other people *like* it when he presents himself as being beneath them. He has learned a lesson that those on the lower rungs of society must in order to succeed: that he must maintain at least the appearance of inferiority before his social superiors, thus sending the message to them that he intends to stay in the lower place to which he has been assigned. Uriah thus takes advantage of this vanity of others and turns it to his own purposes. His "'umility" is actually a great cunning, a complex way of getting what he wants out of life, and getting it in the only way "a person in [his] station" could. But his, and others', willingness to falsify the state have left the would-be virtue of humility in even worse straits than when it was a perhaps unfortunate, but at least honest, affirmation of one's inferiority.

Another alternative to the simple rejection of humility is to put it in a glass case as an object of admiration. Humility is proper for the saints, the beggars, those rare, and not entirely human, blessed people who seem more to be visiting this world than residing in it. But it is not a virtue for the common person, nor should it be expected to be.

One can see the temptation toward this approach as well: in a world where humility is twisted, or abandoned, the truly humble must become more than commonly virtuous, and one can see why most of us, while not wanting to reject the virtue, and indeed admiring it deeply, would also not want to expect it of ourselves. We thus look up to those saintly persons who maintain an allegiance to their virtue, whatever the consequences. They are portrayed, in literature and in life, as possessing great strength, and indeed, they do. But that strength involves enduring what they should not have to, what none of us could imagine enduring in our own lives. Some literally become martyrs for humility. These persons have a strength

greater than any "normal" person has, or could be expected to have. They are "saints."

There is something grand and impressive about the idea of humility as a saintly virtue. The problem is that such a view of humility makes it a virtue *only* for saints and no longer for the common person. The common person insists upon different principles: entering the fray, engaging in the competition, revealing Uriah for his falseness (as Macawber eventually goes on to do), getting angry, refusing to stand for the injustices that surround one, perhaps even presenting oneself as better and stronger, if only, like Uriah, in an attempt to save oneself, to utilize what few tools one has to protect and further oneself. The saintly humble, on the other hand, while they are recognized for their excellence in virtue, are thereby raised onto an inaccessible pedestal that no one dare try to reach. Humility is, ironically, thereby displaced from the center of a virtuous life no less than if it had been outright rejected or falsified.

It seems then that only the self-contemptuous, the duplicitous, and the saints are willing to take on the virtue of humility. We might pity the self-abasers, despise the deceivers, and admire the saints; but in no case are we, the common persons, tempted, willingly and in full knowledge thereof, to emulate the humble states thus portrayed. With such a checkered history, it is not surprising that humility has been abandoned as a central virtue, and that twentieth and twenty-first-century thinkers have done little to reintegrate it into contemporary moral consciousness.

There have, however, been some recent attempts to rehabilitate humility as a virtue. Perhaps in an effort to avoid at least humility-as-inferiority and the temptation toward deceptive humility, some recent writers have sought to make humility the virtue of an extraordinary person. For such writers, humility becomes more like, or at least compatible with, Aristotelian magnanimity, a virtue which reflects the unusually gifted person's admirable handling of the fact of her own superiority. For Stephen Hare,[4] for example, magnanimity and humility come together as a simple case of accurate self-assessment: "[T]he great soul illustrates precisely this special case of humility, accurate assessment of one's own relative moral superiority" (Hare, 1996b, 240). Howard J. Curzer[5] also identifies magnanimity with humility when he suggests that "[f]ar from being viciously proud, the *megalopsychos* actually possesses the essential characteristic of Christian humility, the knowledge of his level of excellence" (Curzer, 1991, 149). And David Statman,[6] though he speaks more of a behavioristic sense of modesty instead of the deeper disposition of humility, claims that the modest person

[4] Hare, 1996b. [5] Curzer, 1991. [6] Statman, 1992.

needs to judge that she "is far above most other human beings" (Statman, 1992, 436), since modesty, for him, is "the required perspective . . . not . . . of the ordinary man, but . . . of the extraordinary" (Statman, 1992, 427).

Though the clear effort here is to remove humility from its marginalization as a virtue, the thought of rehabilitating humility by associating it with superiority is counter-intuitive at best. And, when set against the backdrop of the varying historical associations we have found for humility, these new assessments of the state only further complicate and confuse the question of what humility really is. This dizzying patchwork of portrayals of the humble person, culminating in an effort to define the state as something precisely opposite from what it began as, leads one to suspect that, in the end, we don't really know what humility is. The result is its further marginalization. Once seen to be at the very center of a virtuous life, humility is now, in a twenty-first-century secular version of saintliness, thought appropriate only to the truly extraordinary among us. Worse, for most of us, it is simply not thought of at all.

I believe that humility can be rehabilitated more successfully than these recent accounts have done. Humility is indeed a central human virtue, and we needn't turn it into something it's not in order to rescue it from the dustbin of the virtues. Difficulties in coming to terms with humility are not, however, unexpected. Indeed, to give an account of a virtue which is meant to bring us to terms with our own limits promises to be a difficult task. There is something ironic in the very nature of the task of handling limit in an exemplary way. That balance of admitting limit, but in a way that is admirable, tempts us instead to find a way secretly to transcend that limit which is admitted, and it may be that most any effort to define humility is susceptible to such distortions. As such, to handle the fact of one's limit in a way that is admirable or exemplary is a slippery, difficult thing to do.

We must admit, though, that any study of humility must do just this: come to terms with morally relevant human limits. The fact of human limit is undeniable. We are faced with the fact of our finitude every day: we all make mistakes in both perception and judgment; we are all subject to painful and debilitating illness and disease; we are unable to contain cataclysmic meteorological events like tornados, floods, hurricanes, and mudslides; we all need sleep, food, warmth; we are all susceptible to weaknesses, to error; we all die.

But whether, and the extent to which, human limitation has *moral* significance is a less straightforward question, and this is the question we place at the basis of this study of humility. Surely, some limitations have no, or

negligible, moral significance. That I can't move mountains, or that I have poor long-term memory needn't have a significant influence on the state of my virtue, except, perhaps, in very unusual and specific circumstances. But other sorts of limitation might be more morally significant. And if these limits were to some extent inevitable and intractable, it would be a virtue to recognize them in a morally productive way. Such a recognition established as a pervasive attitude would be *humility*.

Any moral theory which would make humility a central virtue needs, then, to make an appreciation of human limits central to its grounding anthropology. This is what has made the history of humility such a difficult one, but clearly it is also the most important thing to come to terms with. I thus open this study with a philosophical account of that conception of human limits which would properly ground humility as a virtue. What follows is a general account of what virtue would need to be for this sort of being and ultimately a defense of humility as being central to the virtues for any being who has these morally relevant limits.

In this redefinition and defense of humility as a virtue, I take Immanuel Kant as my guide. While the book is thus guided by the picture of humility I take Kant to have suggested in his own works, the overall intent is to defend philosophically the view that humility remains a virtue, and indeed a central virtue, despite its checkered history. It is with careful consideration, and at times expansion, of Kant's ideas that we will be able to make proper sense of the virtue of humility.

This may seem an odd choice of interlocutors. Many, perhaps most, wouldn't think of Kant as a virtue theorist at all, so it is hard to see how he could help us to rehabilitate this particular virtue. But as this study will argue, familiar Kantian principles of action internalized in one's person become character traits, and we can indeed speak then of thick, Aristotelian-style, but still deeply Kantian, virtues. Appreciating this reading of Kant will require us to make a slow movement from focus on action to focus on person, not leaving the former behind, but instead taking it up and incorporating it within a larger and more satisfying Kantian moral theory. Kant, and Kantians, do indeed need to be as concerned with person and character as they are with action. As such, we must say that there is a Kantian virtue theory to be explored and appreciated, and a Kantian story to be told about virtuous character traits, a story in which humility plays a central role. The current work on humility is only one piece in the story of that appreciation, but it is a first step that I hope opens up a new range of possibilities for thinking about Kantian approaches to moral theory.

A chapter-by-chapter summary of the book is as follows:

I begin by assuming that any account of humility must appeal to some minimal account of human nature as limited. Chapter 1 is thus devoted to providing an account of dependent and corrupt but capable and dignified rational agency, along generally Kantian lines. This account of human agency needs to be accepted in some form or another in order for humility to make sense as a virtue, and is one upon which I shall rely for the rest of the book.

The rest of Part I is devoted to making sense of what virtue needs to look like for the dependent and corrupt being identified in chapter 1, and especially what import states of character could have at all in a Kantian account of virtue. Chapter 2 is devoted to some preliminary concerns related to this task, considering the various constraints we need to respect in a construction of Kantian virtue – including an assumption of human corruption as a starting point, and leading to a strong concern for principle, character, and unity of the virtues – and weighing the extent to which recent discussions of it have been cognizant of these constraints.

In chapter 3, relying again upon the structures that Kant himself provides, I construct a formal definition of virtue which does not abandon the centrality of Virtue as an act of will, but which also importantly involves more Aristotelian-style virtues, that is character traits or attitudes which have both affective and cognitive components – what Kant would call "moral interests." This account of virtue furthermore affirms a strong claim about the unity of the virtues, since any "thick" state of character that purports to be virtuous must find its grounding in the ultimate principle of a virtuous will, the so-called "moral disposition" through which one chooses to place moral principles above self-love. The most central virtues on this Kantian picture are found to be: respect for moral principles, respect for persons, and humility toward self, the latter two of which are more specific renderings of one's general moral attitude of respect for moral principles, and are identified through appeal to the two main obligatory ends of increasing the happiness of other persons, and of pursuing perfection of self. Finally, the import of virtue and agent-based concerns generally on a Kantian account of morality is confirmed when it is argued that attention to one's state of character is necessary to assure that one's maxims, especially those related to fulfillment of imperfect duties of virtue, can be truly prescriptive for action.

Part II is an assessment of recent accounts of the virtue of humility from a Kantian point of view. In chapter 4, I retrospectively defend my assumption in chapter 1 that we must provide an account of limited human nature in order to make sense of the virtue of humility. I do this in part by finding

contemporary discussions which abandon claims about human nature, and seek instead to defend a more empirical, behavioristic humility or modesty based on self–other comparison, to be ineffectual. Humility based in self–other comparison is ineffectual because it inadvertently ends up affirming just what these commentators are wanting to avoid, viz., associations of humility with inferiority or, alternatively, superiority.

Part III is devoted to defining the virtue of humility. Chapter 5 is the central chapter of Part III (and, indeed, of the entire book), wherein I present an alternative, and Kantian, definition of humility, relying upon the formal structure of virtue from chapter 3 to guide the discussion and analysis. After introducing the guiding image of Cordelia from *King Lear* and reflecting briefly on what sort of transcendent standard would ground such a person's character, I turn to a positive definition of humility. Humility is a proper perspective on self in light not of comparison of self against other persons, but of one's commitment to the pre-eminent value of moral principles. This attitude is described first from the point of view of the judgments – and especially judgments about the *self as agent* – accepted by one who is in this state, which are found to be implicit in the agent's most general life-guiding maxim of the moral disposition. Such judgments include: that moral reasons are authoritative for her; that she is a dependent being with needs who seeks happiness; that she has a tendency illicitly to place self-love and the pursuit of happiness over her moral principles; and that all humans share the same capacity, dependence, and corrupt tendencies which she attributes to herself. I then turn to a discussion of the feelings and affects which a person committed to these judgments would experience, cultivate, and make part of her settled character. It turns out that these feelings can be best understood as that set of affective responses of which Kant speaks under the title of "moral feeling," that is, constraint or humiliation of self based in an awareness of one's tendency to value the self and one's inclinations improperly, combined with a feeling of self-exultation in the recognition of oneself as a capable rational agent.

Chapter 6 considers and defends a potentially controversial element of our just completed definition of humility: its necessary connection with self-respect. Indeed, the necessary relationship between humility and self-respect is one of mutual dependence: while self-respect is a necessary condition for humility, humility is also a necessary condition for self-respect. Essentially, neither humility nor self-respect can be virtuous states without reference to each other, and acceptance of this necessary relationship of mutual dependence is a keystone in the project of rehabilitating humility. This chapter thus defends this necessary relation and, in so doing,

retrospectively defends the reliability of the maxim of the moral disposition as a guide in the development of one's character.

Chapter 7 steps back from the details of this just completed account of humility and begins to draw a picture of the agent guided by a meta-attitude of humility. One central theme of this chapter is the assertion that the humble person is deeply committed to her belief in the equal dignity and shared limits of all persons. Without such belief, one's self-assessment vis à vis moral principles would slide into an assumption of one's inferiority or superiority vis à vis other persons; and this would destroy the virtue of one's self-assessment. Instead of admitting inferiority or superiority, one's humility operates as the perspective from which one alters one's attitude toward persons generally: instead of viewing one's interactions with others as an opportunity for competitive claims of inferiority and superiority, they become an opportunity for the affirmation of equal dignity, and sympathetic tolerance (but not simple, unquestioning acceptance) of all persons' moral limits. The deeply held values of the humble person also allow her to utilize her appreciation of the value of moral principles as a point of view from which to gain perspective on the fact of her own dependent nature and her pursuit of happiness. I end chapter 7 with some preliminary reflections on the humble person's transformation of problematic self–other comparison into morally tolerable reliance on exemplars in her pursuit of virtue. Having rejected self–other comparison as a means for grounding the state of humility in chapter 4, and remembering Kant's own hesitations about the use of examples in morality, any taking of another person as a moral guide for Kantians will need to be a limited one. But Kantian commitment to character also demands a commitment to more concrete and individual moral ideals or exemplars, and the possibility of such dependence should be pursued in more detail.

Part IV begins a larger discussion of what effect an acceptance of humility as thus defined has on the overall character and actions of the humble person. The first of these chapters (chapter 8) is concerned with duties toward self, and the final chapter (chapter 9) with duties toward others. Both allow us to affirm certain intuitively familiar aspects of the humble person, but now more carefully informed by the preceding account.

Chapter 8 considers the impact this account of humility has on understanding the Kantian attitude toward obligatory self-knowledge, arguing that humility is the only attitude with which to approach successfully this obligatory pursuit. Simultaneously, this chapter determines the proper limits to obligatory self-knowledge: given the Kantian's strong skepticism about an agent's ability to know herself, any excessive demand to achieve such