

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 34 | Issue 4

Article 2

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10-1-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Peterson, Claire Brown (2017) "Humility in the Deficient," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201711289

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol34/iss4/2>

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# HUMILITY IN THE DEFICIENT

Claire Brown Peterson

Contemporary treatments of humility typically treat humility as a virtue that is reserved for the accomplished. I argue that paradigmatic humility can also be possessed by the deficient, and I provide an extended example of such humility. I further argue that attending to such a case helps us to appreciate the way in which the humble have released both the desire for superiority and the aversion to inferiority. Accordingly, when necessary, the humble will exhibit an extremely low concern with their own status relative to that of others.

## *Introduction*

Humility has received a great deal of attention of late, and a point of agreement in the recent literature is that humility is compatible with greatness. Indeed, it has become somewhat standard fare in the discussion to open one's paper by remarking on this compatibility and to go on to use high-achieving individuals as one's examples of humility. We thus today find discussed not lowly or even average individuals but rather high-achieving figures such as Dante,<sup>1</sup> Jesus,<sup>2</sup> Eric Liddell (the Olympic runner depicted in *Chariots of Fire*),<sup>3</sup> Donovan McNabb (the NFL quarterback),<sup>4</sup> an especially good rock climber,<sup>5</sup> and Albert Einstein.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, the contemporary literature often treats humility as equivalent to modesty: a measured response in the wake of one's own greatness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pinsent, "Humility," 247–248, 261–262. Interestingly, Pinsent, who takes seriously the Christian humility tradition, explicitly states that there can be "humble kings as well as humble beggars" (263), yet all of his examples of humility are high-achievers.

<sup>2</sup>Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 239–241.

<sup>3</sup>Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," 255–258.

<sup>4</sup>Austin, "Is Humility a Virtue in the Context of Sport?," 210–211.

<sup>5</sup>Kellenberger, "Humility," 328.

<sup>6</sup>Snow, "Humility," 74–77, 79. Julia Driver also uses the example of Einstein while unpacking the virtue of modesty; see "Modesty and Ignorance," 827.

<sup>7</sup>I am not suggesting that the contemporary discussion assumes that humble people are without fault or that their responses to their faults are irrelevant to their humility. For my purposes, what is significant is that the faults in question are the faults of otherwise impressive individuals. A notable exception to this pattern occurs in Whitcomb et al., "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations," 509–539. I address the limitations-owning account of humility in the final section of this paper.



While I agree with the current sentiment that achievement and humility are compatible, I believe that present-day discussions have neglected an important set of cases of humility: cases featuring individuals who suffer from significant deficiencies and whose deficiencies provide the occasion for their manifestation of humility. I will use the phrase “humility in deficiency” to denote such instances of the virtue of humility. In what follows, I argue that we ought to recognize cases of humility in deficiency as not merely possible but as including paradigmatic instances of the virtue of humility. I further argue that attending to such cases both lends support to and deepens Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood’s contention that the hallmark of the humble is their remarkably low concern with status.<sup>8</sup> As we will see, recognizing how humility operates in the face of significant personal deficiency helps us to appreciate that humility may require one to have an extremely low concern with one’s rank relative to others, a fact that prompts a more charitable response to some of the extreme-sounding admonitions concerning humility that one finds in the Christian tradition. In section I, I clarify what I mean by humility in deficiency, and I identify two objections to the possibility of virtuous, admirable cases of such humility. In section II, I provide an extended example of humility in deficiency, and in section III I draw on this example to address the previously delineated objections. In section IV, I consider five accounts of humility and show how recognition of humility in deficiency provides support for a modified version of Roberts and Wood’s account of humility as insensitivity to status concerns. I close by showing how both my example of humility in deficiency and the defended status-insensitivity account of humility provide the resources for an apologetic for Christianity’s traditionally extreme teachings about humility.

### *I. Humility in Deficiency: The Past-Present Disconnect*

As stated above, I am interested in cases of what I am calling “humility in deficiency,” i.e., cases of humility in which an individual suffers from a significant defect that provides the occasion for that person’s manifestation of humility. I should clarify that when I say that the agent suffers from a significant defect, I mean that the individual in question has a defect, and this defect, while not in any way diminishing her claim to human dignity, does reflect negatively on her overall moral or personal worth in a significant way.<sup>9</sup> My deficient agent need not be deficient in all aspects of

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<sup>8</sup>Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 239.

<sup>9</sup>To understand what I mean by “moral worth” and “personal worth” consider the everyday claim that the virtues “make one a better person,” so that a generally virtuous person is superior to a generally vicious person in a much more significant and fundamental way than, say, the way in which a person who is a decent tennis player is superior to a person who is terrible at tennis. In my language, the generally virtuous person has significantly greater moral and (all other things being equal) personal worth than the generally vicious person, but the same is not true of the decent tennis player compared to the poor tennis player. In this paper, I will assume that moral worth is at least one prominent determinant of personal worth, but I will be agnostic about whether there are any other determinants of

her life (although she might be quite deficient in many such aspects), but to count as an example of humility in deficiency, the individual's moral or personal failings in at least one important area of her life must be sufficiently significant that describing this person and her life thus far without mentioning these specific deficiencies would make for a misleading picture of that individual *qua* person.

I am arguing that (at least some) examples of humility in deficiency belong among the paradigmatic examples of the virtue of humility. If we take humility's history seriously, we should expect this result. When Christianity deemed humility a virtue, the designation was countercultural as reflected by the fact that the word translated "humility" in the Christian New Testament indicated lowliness and carried negative connotations. We in the English-speaking world continue to see this connection in humility's cognates, "humbled," and, "humiliation," which suggest embarrassment, low status, and even shame. In the Christian tradition, one frequently finds advocates of humility giving admonitions such as the following, by Thomas à Kempis and Benedict of Nursia, respectively:

It is the humble man whom God protects and liberates; it is the humble whom He loves and consoles. To the humble He turns and upon them bestows great grace, that after their humiliation He may raise them up to glory. . . . Hence, you must not think that you have made any progress until you look upon yourself as inferior to all others.<sup>10</sup>

The seventh degree of humility is, when, not only with his tongue he declar-eth, but also in his inmost soul believeth, that he is the lowest and vilest of men, humbling himself and saying with the Prophet: "But I am a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people."<sup>11</sup>

One could argue that the authors of the above quotations are either not representative of what has been typical historically of Christian teachings on humility or that the quotations, taken on their own and devoid of context, are misleading. While such arguments might remove the temptation to equate humility with self-abnegation, they cannot sever the connection to lowliness that characterizes the history of the virtue. Given that history, it would be shocking were it to turn out that humility is a virtue that presupposes high achievement.

With the connections to lowliness reflected above, it should come as no surprise that several philosophical juggernauts—and not just Nietzsche—considered humility to be a vice. Yet the vice classification is precisely the feature of humility's history that is at least puzzling if humility is a character trait that only great people possess. One could, of course, point out

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personal worth. If there are non-moral determinants of personal worth, the most plausible suggestions are factors that seem obviously to make one good *qua* being (perfect being theology is one place to look for such factors) or good *qua* human.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 29.

<sup>11</sup>Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter VII.

that when Aristotle and Hume, for instance, designate humility a vice,<sup>12</sup> they are to some extent misunderstanding the true nature of the virtue, perhaps confusing it with self-abnegation. But it would be surprising if, once we correct that misunderstanding, the only substantive disagreement between those who value (genuine) humility and those who do not (e.g., Aristotle) is the issue of how one should respond to one's own greatness—the disagreement being that Aristotle thinks the great soul will celebrate its own greatness, which will provide motivation for great deeds befitting an excellent person, while those who value humility know that the greatest individuals keep their accomplishments in perspective and acknowledge their debts to others. If this is one's only disagreement with Aristotle, one needs to be open to the possibility that the virtue one prizes is not humility but *modesty*. The tradition behind humility is far too radical to allow for such an easy bridge to Aristotle.

Despite the traditional tie between humility and lowliness, contemporary discussions of humility have not tended to emphasize the compatibility of humility and significant deficiency or lack of excellence. Nor is this failure of emphasis a simple matter of oversight. A few philosophers explicitly claim that only the excellent can manifest admirable, virtuous humility. For example, Daniel Statman contends that humility or modesty (Statman takes the two to be nearly identical) is a "dependent virtue" in the sense that it is a virtue the possession of which depends on the possession of other virtues.<sup>13</sup> One does not "count" as admirably humble if one, like Aristotle's temperate person, rightly recognizes one's own mediocrity and acts accordingly. "Only within people with admirable virtues and excellences does humility count as an (additional) virtue. This entails that, necessarily, if one has the virtue of humility, one is a highly admirable person."<sup>14</sup> Norvin Richards and Joseph Kupfer also have views that rule out the possibility of especially admirable, virtuous humility without prior greatness of some sort. Richards insists that great people are those in whom we most admire humility,<sup>15</sup> and Kupfer explains his own focus on excellent people with the observation, "It seems that the greater one's accomplishment, the more admirable his or her humility."<sup>16</sup> Of these authors, only Richards provides much detail about why considering humility an admirable virtue in the deficient is wrong-headed or at least non-paradigmatic, and his argument has to do with degree of difficulty: adopting a non-arrogant attitude when one is great and being told the same and more requires a good measure of self-restraint.<sup>17</sup> Presumably, Richards does not think that similar measures of self-restraint are

<sup>12</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1125a. Hume, *Enquiries*, 270.

<sup>13</sup>Statman, "Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment," 425.

<sup>14</sup>Statman, "Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment," 425.

<sup>15</sup>Richards, *Humility*, 3.

<sup>16</sup>Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," 250.

<sup>17</sup>Richards, *Humility*, 11–12.

required of the deficient. If we are to allow for humility in deficiency, we will need an answer to Richard's charge.

A second objection that must be addressed if we are to allow for virtuous humility in deficiency concerns the vice of servility. While I know of no one who has claimed that strongly humble attitudes in response to significant personal deficiency imply servility, the desire to separate humility from servility is nearly ubiquitous in the contemporary literature and may well be a primary reason that that literature is so lacking in examples of humility in deficiency. A compelling case of humility in deficiency must be able to address both Richard's charge and the servility suspicion.

## *II. Humility, Failure, and Model Identities: The Gary Case*

For a paradigm case of humility involving significant deficiency, consider an unnamed man's description of his own struggles with an addiction to alcohol. For ease of reference, I will call the writer "Gary." The following excerpt from Gary's story picks up fifteen years into his addiction, long after his addiction has turned violent and separated him from his family.

The specifics are pretty much the same as for most alcoholics. I went places I used to swear I would never go. I did things I could not imagine myself doing. I hung out with people that at one time I would cross the street to avoid. There came a time when, looking into the mirror, I honestly did not know just who was looking back at me. . . .

A friend took pity on me, I think, and invited me to his home for Thanksgiving. His parents were in town from the East Coast, and he was having a big party. There at the dinner table, I stood up and attempted suicide in front of everyone. . . .

As a result of that episode, I ended up seeing a psychiatrist to find out what was wrong with me. At our very first session she invited me to "tell me about yourself." I proceeded to do so, only to be told to stop after I had only spoken for five minutes or so. She explained that she really only had two things to say to me: that she thought I hadn't told the truth since I walked into the office, and that I was an alcoholic. (It took me a long time to understand how a description of my life could make anyone think I was a drunk.)

At the recommendation of his psychiatrist, Gary agrees to go to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.).

When I drove up to that first meeting, though, I saw that the address I had was actually a church. As a nice Jewish boy, I was not about to wander into a church; I knew that I would not be welcome. I hid on the floorboards of the car and peeked out the window, waiting for the drunks to walk by. . . .

I didn't like A.A. and the people in it for a long time. I didn't trust anyone, and I got tired of sitting at meetings listening to other newcomers as they began to talk of finding God, having their families return to them, being treated with respect by society, and finding some peace of mind. . . . I had what I now call "a sponsor of the month." I always had a sponsor, but whenever one of them would "lovingly suggest" I do something, I would fire them and move on to someone else. I remained angry, bitter, and isolated, even though I was going to five or six A.A. meetings per week and was not

drinking. At seven months sober I was getting a little bored with A.A. and began to wonder if this was all there was to life.

Gary next describes becoming angrier but staying sober for two years and reluctantly agreeing to take a service job in A.A.

The best thing about A.A. service jobs is that, for a period of time, I got out of myself. At some point I began to shut my mouth and actually listen to what other people were saying at meetings. After white-knuckling it for almost two years in A.A., I finally broke down and saw that I could not stay sober all by myself, but I was terrified of going back to drinking. . . .

One evening I did the unimaginable—at least for me. After picking up my sponsor of the month to go to a meeting, I informed him that I was ready to work the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In most respects my life began again that night. . . . When I reached the Ninth Step [making amends for past wrongs], I began to hesitate in my enthusiasm. One morning I woke up covered in sweat and could not get over a nightmare I had—that this was my last day of sobriety. After calling friends and my sponsor, I knew what had to be done. I spent the entire day, more than eight or nine hours, going into people's offices and making my amends. Some were thrilled to see me. One woman called the police. . . .

When I was four years sober . . . I made amends to the man I had attempted to kill when I was fifteen years old. I visited, and made amends to, several people who had sat at that Thanksgiving dinner table and had watched me attempt suicide in front of them. I came home exhausted but knew that I had somehow done the right thing. . . .

I am truly a grateful alcoholic today. I do not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. Those events that once made me feel ashamed and disgraced now allow me to share with others how to become a useful member of the human race . . . I am aware that I am not the only person on this earth with problems.<sup>18</sup>

James Kellenberger uses the term “model identity” to refer to “one’s ideal self-conception”—the sort of person one aspires to be, not in the way that a talented athlete might aspire to go to the Olympics, dreaming of greatness, but rather in a way closely tied to one’s standards for personal worth, as opposed to personal accomplishments. Kellenberger connects these model identities to the way in which shame and pride manifest themselves in individuals: when a person achieves her model identity, she feels pride, but when she realizes that she falls short of it, she feels shame.<sup>19</sup> Notice how Gary’s model identity and his relationship with that identity

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<sup>18</sup>Alcoholics Anonymous, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 487–493.

<sup>19</sup>Kellenberger, “Humility,” 326–327. One can find support for Kellenberger’s suggestion in the empirical literature. Psychologists Jessica L. Tracy and Richard W. Robbins advocate a model of the “self-conscious emotions” (e.g., pride, guilt, embarrassment, and shame) on which the emotion of shame results from a perceived disconnect between one’s self-representations and what Tracy and Robbins call one’s “identity-goal,” and the emotion of hubristic pride results from a perceived fit between these two things, where the disconnect or fit pertains to features of the self that are perceived to be global rather than local and long-term rather than temporary, “Putting the Self into Self-Conscious Emotions,” 108–114. Thanks to Michelle Mason for drawing my attention to this point.

change over the course of the narrative. As a result of his addiction, he becomes the sort of person he has long looked down upon: "I hung out with people that at one time I would cross the street to avoid. There came a time when, looking into the mirror, I honestly did not know just who was looking back at me." While Gary recognizes some of these changes in himself, it takes time for him to admit how far he has fallen from his model identity. Thus, he initially will not open up to his psychiatrist and is surprised when she suggests that he has an addiction. Although he agrees to attend A.A., he hates associating himself with "drunks" and hesitates at risking rejection by entering a church to receive help.

Identifying with and accepting help from people who are the opposite of his model identity are the first big steps that Gary takes towards humility, even if Gary's identification with other addicted persons occurs at first and for a long time at only a provisional level. Gary more fully develops humility a few years later after he takes a service job, listens to his fellow group members (thus showing respect for the sort of person he had previously held in contempt), and apologizes to those he previously wronged, thereby going out of his way to humble himself before people in his past with the knowledge that those people might reject him. Apologizing to those in his past is significant not only in that it involves admitting his own failure to reach a model identity, but also because offering such an apology means consciously and publicly accepting a low place in the social hierarchy. Finally, it is worth noting that the motive inspiring all of these actions is not aspiration toward the model identity of virtuous person ("I decided to apologize because I wronged these people and I had decided to become a good person, own up to my mistakes, and give others closure") but desperation. Gary is "terrified" that if he does not submit to his sponsor or make amends to those in his past, he will go back to drinking.<sup>20</sup>

We can certainly find parallels between humility as manifested in Gary's story and humility as discussed in the contemporary literature: Gary treats others with respect,<sup>21</sup> is aware of his limitations,<sup>22</sup> admits his dependence on others,<sup>23</sup> is grateful for the help he receives,<sup>24</sup> and appears to keep his own accomplishments in perspective.<sup>25</sup> Yet it is worth noting differences between Gary and the humility all-stars one finds in the contemporary

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<sup>20</sup>It is interesting to note that Gary's apologies are sincere but motivated by (virtuous) self-interest. Both the sincerity of the apologies and the fact that his aim (sobriety) is morally good are crucial for preventing his self-interested motive from rendering his apologies vicious or amoral.

<sup>21</sup>Statman, "Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment," 437.

<sup>22</sup>Button, "A Monkish Kind of Virtue?," 851–853.

<sup>23</sup>Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," 251–252; Boyd, "Pride and Humility," 257–260; Rushing, "Comparative Humilities," 200.

<sup>24</sup>Boyd, "Pride and Humility," 259–260; Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," 260–263.

<sup>25</sup>Richards, *Humility*, 5–7. Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," 250 and 253.



literature. Take, for instance, Roberts and Wood's example, G. E. Moore. In describing Moore, Roberts and Wood quote his former student, Alice Ambrose, who recalls Moore's willingness to acknowledge and correct his own errors in such a way that his criticisms "could as well have been directed at an anonymous philosopher whose mistakes called for correction."<sup>26</sup> Both Gary and Moore have faults that they (in Gary's case eventually) fully admit. Yet the difference in extent and significance of these faults is glaring: Moore's advanced philosophical views were in need of improvement, and he was quick to recognize this fact and correct his errors with little to no damage done to himself or others. While none of us knows the specifics of Moore's model identity, it is hard to believe that Moore, when he makes a few errors in class, is departing widely from his model identity. Indeed, if Moore's model identity precludes the occasional classroom error, we might well question his status as an exemplar of humility. Gary's addiction destroyed relationships and even turned violent. Managing his addiction, moreover, required an involved recovery program of weekly meetings, difficult apologies, and submitting to a sponsor. Gary's failures are thus more entrenched, more extreme, and for these reasons likely much more connected to his own standards for personal worth than Moore's are to his.

Aristotle's *megalopsychos* (the magnanimous person or "great soul") offers a helpful lens for further exploring the relevant differences between Gary and Moore in that Moore's goals are suggestive of Aristotle's *megalopsychos* whereas Gary's aims are not. Recall that Aristotle's *megalopsychos* is excellent, possessing all virtue. He values honor above all other external goods, yet he does not consider even honor to be of much value.<sup>27</sup> He desires greatness for its own sake rather than for the sake of honors. By recognizing his own greatness and valuing greatness for its own sake, he is able to aspire to the great achievements benefitting others that elude most people.<sup>28</sup> Such an aspiration to greatness (in philosophy, for its own sake) is found in Moore but not Gary. Both Gary and Moore can be described as having a low concern with honor relative to their concern with something else: in Gary's case, sobriety, in Moore's case, truth. Yet Moore's surpassing concern with truth is an instance of aiming at greatness whereas Gary's concern with sobriety is merely aiming at normalcy. Moore is trying to tackle philosophical problems that have eluded those before him. Gary just wants to live sober without "white-knuckling it."

Gary is certainly admirable. His humility is arguably more heroic than Moore's, given the emotional wherewithal needed to complete the Twelve Steps. Moreover, Gary's eventual work of using his experiences to support others is at least as valuable as Moore's work in philosophy. Yet as far as we know, the only positive traits that Gary possesses in an extraordinary

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<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 240.

<sup>27</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124a.

<sup>28</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1123b and 1124b.

way, at least at the time he makes his first apologies, are humility itself and whatever supporting virtues it requires.<sup>29</sup> Gary, unlike Moore, is thus not at all magnanimous in the Aristotelian sense or even in an updated Aristotelian sense that purges Aristotle of his undemocratic and individualistic ideals (e.g., a neo-Aristotelian magnanimity that allows for acknowledged dependence).<sup>30</sup> To sum up, when it comes to the way in which their failures, aims, and personal qualities stack up against both widely accepted and (from what we can tell) self-accepted standards of personal worth, Gary and Moore are far apart from one another, even though both are highly humble.

I suspect that some will object to my claim that Gary is an example of paradigmatic, virtuous humility on the grounds that addiction is a medical problem, so that the humble attitudes Gary develops are misplaced. In response to the disease objection, I first wish to note that the simple designation of addiction to alcohol as a “disease” is far from obvious.<sup>31</sup> More significantly for my purposes, even if addiction to alcohol is a disease that afflicts Gary, the belief that he suffers from a disease and not any sort of moral failure may not be one that Gary has reason to believe given his context.<sup>32</sup> We all have to respond to information as it is available to us, and provided Gary is justified in believing that (1) A.A. offers him his best available shot at achieving sobriety and (2) he is responsible for the acts for which he takes responsibility, Gary’s humble attitudes and actions are morally justified.

Additionally, note that classifying addiction to alcohol as a disease does not imply that Gary lacks the significant “personal or moral” deficiencies referenced in my definition of humility in deficiency. Consider the significant offenses that the loved ones of addicted persons often struggle to forgive. Many such offenses ought to be seen as stemming from moral

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<sup>29</sup>By potential “supporting” virtues, I have in mind such virtues as forgivingness and empathy, in that it is possible that one cannot have the virtue of humility without having some measure of one or both of these virtues. Note that the position that such supporting virtues are possibly required for humility is very different from Staman’s contention that humility does not “count” as virtuous if one does not possess other virtues. Statman is thinking of these other virtues as the excellences to which humility is responsive, not as moral orientations so closely related to humility that they are required for its exercise.

<sup>30</sup>Herdt calls for altering Aristotle’s account of magnanimity in this way (*Putting on Virtue*, 42–44).

<sup>31</sup>Note that classifying substance addiction as disease rather than character defect requires fairly detailed definitions of both “disease” (presumably some sort of defect of the body which can include neurobiological problems) and “character defect” (presumably some different sort of defect of the will that, like all volitional phenomena, will have a neurobiological profile). Kent Dunnington has argued that a careful consideration of addiction reveals that neither the category of disease nor the category of choice adequately captures the phenomenon of addiction. See *Addiction and Virtue*, esp. chapters 1 and 2. Even though Dunnington holds that addictive behavior is not voluntary, he does argue that it is subject to moral evaluation. (Dunnington classifies addiction as a habit, in the Thomistic sense.)

<sup>32</sup>Recall that Gary seeks out a psychiatrist to discover what is wrong with him, and that psychiatrist—a person whom he has good reason to trust—is the one who recommends that he attend Alcoholics Anonymous.

failings even if alcohol addiction itself is a disease in the sense that (1) it is a negative, debilitating condition that no one chooses as such and (2) the substance-dependence that characterizes the addiction cannot be controlled through willpower. Moreover, if repeated personal choices previously contributed to or reinforced the addiction, powerlessness over alcohol could be classified as both a (partly self-inflicted) disease and a personal deficiency. Such “repeated personal choices” need not only include individual decisions to drink: they also could include, for instance, ignoring the pleas of one’s loved-ones to “get help” or belittling those who pursued a less risky lifestyle. Thus, even if addiction to alcohol is a type of disease, one may be able to demonstrate admirable, extraordinary, humility in deficiency in attempting to grapple with that disease, any choices that contributed to it, and the extensive negative effects it has had on one’s personhood and actions.

Those still convinced that addiction is a disease and that this fact makes the Gary example a non-starter are invited to adjust the example so that it features a person who suffers from a self-cultivated moral or personal failing that has come to dominate her life and destroy her relationships. An example might be a person who, over the course of several years, makes her living by participating in a pyramid scheme that she has used to exploit her family, friends, and impoverished neighbors all the while self-deceptively telling herself that she is “empowering” people. Imagine that this person eventually herself experiences bankruptcy at the hands of the very scheme in which she participated and that she eventually undertakes a reconciliation program that mirrors Gary’s: admission of one’s failings, identification with those who have met similar fates, making amends, and perhaps even submission to a sponsor-like figure. Such a person (a kind of modern day Zacchaeus figure) would be another example of humility in deficiency.

Since overcoming addiction is quite an accomplishment, one might object that Gary is not a counterexample to the claim that humility requires greatness after all. When we celebrate Gary’s humility, one might argue, we are celebrating not just the fact that he has apologized to others and has not been intoxicated recently (the latter of which is true and unremarkable in most adults), but his success battling addiction, and that success is quite remarkable. We can see that this line of argument is mistaken, at least if used as a reason for thinking that significant humility requires significant achievement (beyond humility itself and whatever supporting virtues humility requires) by tweaking Gary’s story in such a way that he never achieves long-term sobriety. Even if Gary were to frequently fail in his battle with addiction, and even if in so failing he were to continue to hurt his family, friends, and his own ability to care for himself, if Gary were to maintain the attitudes and behaviors that we see at the end of his story—acknowledged dependency, recognition of his own responsibility for past and continued wrongs, and listening to and identifying with people he

previously held in contempt—we ought still consider him a paradigmatic example of humility.

*III. Addressing the Objections:  
Impressive, Non-Servile Humility in Deficiency*

Let us return to the previously noted objections to the possibility of virtuous, admirable cases of humility in which the agent is notable for having a deficiency rather than for an accomplishment. Those objections, recall, are the following: (1) humility cannot be admirably virtuous in the deficient because adopting a non-arrogant attitude when one is deficient rather than excellent requires little in the way of self-restraint and (2) what I am calling humility in deficiency is actually servility.

The example of Gary provides a straightforward response to Richards's contention that humility is only admirable in the excellent. Richards may be right that Gary's deficiencies make it easy for him not to expect to be honored above other people, so that he does not face the temptations that a moral hero might face. Nevertheless, pre-recovery Gary faces the very strong temptation to pretend that his deficiencies do not exist: that his drinking is under control or at any rate can be controlled without significant outside help (whether in the form of professional counseling, A.A. meetings, or a yet-to-be-invented medical intervention). While everyone is tempted to downplay or ignore the ways that they have hurt others in the past, this temptation is likely stronger than usual for Gary given the specific patterns of behavior that characterize his pre-sobriety life. The temptation a great person faces is to exaggerate the extent or significance of her accomplishments and to let that exaggeration influence her attitude and actions; a deficient person faces similar temptations to underestimate the extent and significance of her failings. Humility can be an admirable virtue no matter which of these temptations it is fighting.

What of the concern that humble attitudes in response to deficiency betray servility? One can certainly imagine a case of servility in which a deficient person adopts a vaguely humble, self-effacing attitude. Indeed, one of the three examples of servility in Thomas Hill's classic article, "Servility and Self-Respect," is such a case: Hill's "Self-Deprecator" is acutely *and accurately* aware of his own failings and responds by deferring to others and accepting maltreatment, believing that such treatment is what he deserves.<sup>33</sup> Yet the fact that a deficient person can recognize her own deficiencies and improperly respond in a servile way does not rule out the possibility that a deficient person could instead recognize her faults and properly respond in an admirable and humble but non-servile way.

For Hill, the distinguishing mark of servility is a failure to recognize or assert one's equal moral worth as a human being.<sup>34</sup> More specifically, servility is objectionable insofar as it involves "a willingness to disavow one's

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<sup>33</sup>Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," 77–78.

<sup>34</sup>Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," 82–85.

moral status, publicly and systematically, in the absence of any strong reason to do so."<sup>35</sup> Nothing in Gary's testimony indicates that he thinks that he lacks basic human dignity. He does to some extent accept negative treatment from those who have chosen not to forgive him for the ways he previously wronged them (e.g., he has no negative words to say about the woman who called the police when he showed up to apologize to her), but his mindset on this front seems altogether healthy. It would not be a mark of superior emotional health if he were to take offense at the woman's action. To be sure, the depth of Gary's contrition and the extreme nature of twelve-step programs can be uncomfortable to consider. Yet what needs to be remembered is that the primary motive behind the extreme humbling steps he takes (e.g., making amends to those in his past, accepting help from a group of people who wronged him) is concern for his own welfare. This motive is significant given that, as Hill notes, otherwise servile actions can be non-servile and justified if done for a sufficiently good reason. Certainly one's own sobriety is such a reason. Accordingly, Gary ought not to be accused of servility.

#### IV. *Assessing the Accounts: Humility as Unconcern with Status*

I have thus far argued that we recognize humility in deficiency as a non-empty category and even as including paradigmatic instances of the virtue of humility. We can now consider how attending to a case of humility in deficiency can help to adjudicate among competing accounts of humility. Several accounts in the literature explicitly require that the humble have accomplishments or good features to which their humility is in some sense responsive (e.g., Richards's account on which the humble are those who keep their accomplishments "in perspective"),<sup>36</sup> and such accounts ought to be rejected. As we have seen, while Gary's successes battling addiction are impressive, his attitude toward those successes is not the primary grounds of his humility, and he could manifest virtuous humility even if he lacked those successes.

Another account of humility that one finds in the literature construes humility as a kind of forgetting of the self: low self-focus and high other-focus, a view Thomas Nadelhoffer and his co-authors have dubbed the "decentered and devoted view."<sup>37</sup> We certainly observe indicators of high other-focus in Gary's story ("At some point I began to shut my mouth

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<sup>35</sup>Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," 85.

<sup>36</sup>Richards, *Humility*, 188. Joseph Kupfer similarly states that the humble recognize their successes as depending on others and keep their "technical achievements in still larger perspective." (Kupfer, "The Moral Perspective of Humility," 252–253.) Statman's account of modesty (which he equates with humility) also falls into this category, in that any person who is modest "is genuinely admirable and, in many respects, is far above most other human beings." (Statman, "Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment," 436.)

<sup>37</sup>Nadelhoffer et al., "Some Varieties of Humility Worth Wanting," 12. One challenge that the decentered and devoted view faces is that of defining its concepts of self-focus and other-focus in such a way that it is clear that the account is not conflating humility with the related but distinct virtues of altruism, generosity, compassion, empathy, and charity.

and actually listen to what other people were saying"; "I am aware that I am not the only person on this earth with problems"). Moreover, Gary's attitude toward others as reflected in these remarks is connected to our assessment of him as humble, and this is one mark in favor of the decentered and devoted view. We should not exaggerate the extent of Gary's other-focus, however. Recall that Gary's driving motive for many of his actions is decidedly self-focused: he is desperate for sobriety. Furthermore, Gary's own detailed self-narrative gives us little indication that he thinks about himself significantly less often than most people think about themselves.<sup>38</sup> No doubt the decentered and devoted view will recognize humility as compatible with emotionally healthy levels of self-attention. As a result, nothing in the decentered and devoted view implies that Gary is viciously prideful because he "thinks too much about himself." The problem with the decentered and devoted view is not that it classifies Gary's attention toward his own failings as vicious or unhealthy, but that it fails to recognize the way in which he thinks of himself (e.g., his brutal self-honesty) as a *positive* indicator of humility and instead looks for a trait that, for all we know, Gary lacks (low self-focus). The decentered and devoted view is at best incomplete as an account of humility.

Both of the accounts we have considered so far have failed to recognize the way in which attending to and acknowledging one's deficiencies can manifest humility. Perhaps the solution is simply to say that humility is a matter of accurate self-assessment: the humble are those who recognize the extent and significance of both their good qualities or accomplishments and their bad qualities or failures. An accurate assessment account rightly recognizes Gary as humble and zeroes in on a crucial indicator of his humility: his acknowledgement of his own failings. Unfortunately, an accuracy account does not properly recognize Gary as a *paradigmatic* example of humility. Gary's especially high degree of humility is not a simple matter of his self-assessments being especially accurate. Moreover, it is hard to see why mere accuracy should be so important a feature of a moral (rather than intellectual) virtue. We should ask, "Why is it morally (and not merely epistemically) admirable to correctly assess one's good or bad qualities, even though it is not especially morally admirable to correctly assess, say, the reliability of a friend?" The answer is not simply that humans have a natural inclination toward exaggerating their own importance. Humans may also have a natural inclination to mistakenly assume that their friends are reliable, but overcoming such an inclination is not as such an exercise in moral virtue. Nor is the answer supplied by the importance of accurate self-assessment in normal human life compared with, say, the importance of accurate friend-reliability assessment in normal human life.

Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder's "limitations-owning" account is arguably able to provide a more

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<sup>38</sup>On this front, note that high other-focus does not imply low self-focus.

robust analysis of Gary and the humble nature of his self-admissions. According to their limitations-owning account of *intellectual* humility, intellectual humility “consists in proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one’s intellectual limitations,”<sup>39</sup> where “owning” one’s intellectual limitations has cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and affective implications.<sup>40</sup> A person who owns her intellectual limitations will, for instance, “in accordance with what the context demands,” recognize (cognitive), admit (behavioral), care about (affective), and seek to remedy (motivational) those limitations.<sup>41</sup> If we remove the specific references to intellectual limitations, we will have an account of humility that describes Gary well and brings attention to actions and attitudes that are at the heart of his humility. This result is not surprising given that, in explicating their notion of “owning” one’s intellectual limitations, the authors note the strong similarities between the attitude toward one’s own addiction that twelve-step programs seek to inculcate and the attitude toward one’s intellectual limitations that their model emphasizes.<sup>42</sup>

To understand the problem with the limitations-owning account, imagine a talented swimmer who for several years has languished firmly in the middle of the pack at the elite international competitions that he frequents. Imagine that this swimmer hates his middling ranking and thinks about it obsessively, feeling anger and disgust toward himself for being (in his mind) “just a notch above the rest of the losers.” Let us suppose that the swimmer in question is fully aware of his limitations and the extent of his own responsibility for them, admits these limitations to himself and others, and works fixatedly to counter those limitations in order to better his performance. This envy-eaten swimmer has fully owned his limitations, but he is far from humble. Indeed, imagine that the swimmer’s efforts are ultimately successful, that he manages to correct all of his limitations and sets several world records over the next few years, his feelings of anger having now been replaced by a smug sense of satisfaction: he has “made it,” he knows it, and he glories in this fact, looking down on the rest of the field. The swimmer’s overall moral orientation will not have changed and yet he will have become the very picture of vicious pride.

One might object that the limitations-owning account has an easy defense against my swimmer example: the limitations-owning account requires *proper* cognitive, affective, behavioral, and motivational responses to one’s limitations, and insofar as anger and bitterness are not proper affective responses for the swimmer to take to his limitations, the limitations-owning account will not recognize the envious swimmer as having the virtue of humility. Yet this response reveals a problematic point of slippage in the limitations-owning account. On the one hand, if “owning

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<sup>39</sup>Whitcomb et al., “Intellectual Humility,” 520.

<sup>40</sup>Whitcomb et al., “Intellectual Humility,” 516–518.

<sup>41</sup>Whitcomb et al., “Intellectual Humility,” 518.

<sup>42</sup>Whitcomb et al., “Intellectual Humility,” 519.

one's limitations" is shorthand for the general attitude of a person who readily "owns up" to her limitations—not blaming them on others, not ignoring their significance, accepting responsibility for addressing them and their consequences—then the limitations-owning account is a helpfully descriptive account that unfortunately falls prey to the swimmer counterexample. On the other hand, if "owning one's limitations" is simply equivalent to "responds rightly or virtuously to one's limitations," the limitations-owning account is disappointingly non-descriptive. While it may be that we can find no more descriptive an account of humility than "the virtue consisting in proper attitudes towards and responses to one's failings," we should hope more can be said.

The limitations-owning account faces a second, fatal problem: it is incorrect in that humility is not simply a disposition to have the appropriate (or "owning") profile of responses with respect to one's limitations. While I have been at pains to argue that one can have humility without high achievement and that one's responses to major failings can manifest humility, I agree with the bulk of the recent literature that humility is also compatible with great achievement and can likewise be positively manifested in one's response to one's own achievements. In short, humility, the virtuous *character trait* seems to be an overall moral orientation that is often displayed in how one responds to one's failures and successes but that presupposes neither. For an example of humility without failings, consider Jesus as depicted in the Christian New Testament and grant for the sake of argument that he lived a sinless life. It does not follow either that Jesus lacked humility or that his humility consisted in his owning any other limitations he may have had.<sup>43</sup>

I submit that we can find a more descriptive account of humility that is able to accommodate both cases of deficiency and cases of high achievement in a slightly modified version of Roberts and Wood's account of humility as "a striking or unusual unconcern for social importance, and thus a kind of emotional *insensitivity* to the issues of status."<sup>44</sup> I will call my modified version of this account the "status-insensitivity account" of humility. The first modification my account involves concerns the meaning of the term, "status." When Roberts and Wood offer their account, they are specifically attempting to provide an account of humility as opposed to the vice of *vanity*. Insofar as vanity concerns appearances and what other people think about one, Roberts and Wood are conceiving of status as one's *socially recognized* place in the hierarchy of persons. Since I am interested in humility as the virtue that opposes the vice of pride, I propose modifying their account by understanding "status" as something like "comparative personal worth" or "one's correct or rightful rank as a person relative to others." A vain person wants others to believe she

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<sup>43</sup>Jesus's humility is also not constituted by the fact that he had no limitations and therefore (trivially) owned all of his limitations.

<sup>44</sup>Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 239.



has high comparative personal worth. A viciously proud person wants actually to have high comparative personal worth. A humble person is remarkably unconcerned with how she stacks up relative to others: when it comes to personal worth, she has little to no desire to be superior to others and she has little to no aversion to others being superior to her.<sup>45</sup>

The second modification I wish to make to Roberts and Wood's account pertains to the negative character of their account. Two-year-olds are, in general, unconcerned with how they stack up relative to others, yet it would be a mistake to attribute the virtue of humility to two-year-olds, (although this feature of small children may well be relevant to understanding Jesus's injunction about becoming "humble like this child").<sup>46</sup> I suspect that Roberts and Woods intend that their account of humility be applied to a subset of human beings, and I submit that the relevant class is those humans reflective enough to have model identities. On the status-insensitivity account of humility that I am defending, then, the humble person, like all reflective people, will have values that determine a particular model identity, will desire to achieve this model identity, will experience feelings of pride (the emotion, not the vice) when she perceives herself as having achieved it, and will experience feelings of shame when she perceives herself as departing widely from it. Unlike most people, however, she will not at all desire the characteristics constitutive of this model identity because of the ways in which they stand to (or at least seem to stand to) make her superior to other people. Thus, if her model identity involves being intelligent, although she will desire intelligence, she will not care at all about being more intelligent than others.<sup>47</sup> She will not

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<sup>45</sup>Some may object that there is no such thing as personal worth: people act as if some persons are better than others *qua* person, but in fact all human persons possess full human dignity, and there are no further value distinctions among human persons other than ones that have little in the way of ultimate significance (e.g., the ability to ride a bike). While the status-insensitivity account can be unwieldy to discuss if personal worth is a fiction, the account itself stands even if there is no such thing as varying degrees of personal worth among human beings. What matters for the account is that people *desire* high comparative personal worth, not that these gradations actually exist. Significantly, people can desire both things that are illusory and things they believe to be illusory. For example, I can desire to be a child of the rightful King of France even if there is no rightful King of France (and even if I acknowledge this fact). What matters is that I have a desire to be a person who fits the description "child of the rightful King of France." Similarly, what matters for the status-insensitivity account is that some people (the viciously proud) desire to fit the description "person of high comparative personal worth" or have an aversion to fitting the description "person of low comparative personal worth" and others (the humble) have no such desires or aversions.

<sup>46</sup>Matt. 18:4, NRSV.

<sup>47</sup>One might worry that intelligence, along with a host of other likely candidates for inclusion in a model identity, is a characteristic that is inherently comparative in that it must be defined by reference to other people. If one is less intelligent than the majority of people, the argument goes, then one cannot qualify as intelligent. My response is that intelligence, like moral virtue, can be defined by reference to the species rather than the majority of the members of the species. (Alternatively, it could also be defined by reference to ideal intelligence.) It is no inherent contradiction to suppose that the majority of the members of the human species might become morally virtuous by acquiring the moral characteristics that are perfecting of human beings. It is similarly no contradiction to suppose that the majority

treat intelligence as a private good whose value to her diminishes as other people acquire more of it. Moreover, her model identity itself will not be defined in terms of how she stacks up to others (e.g., being a “winner” rather than a “loser”).

If my version of the status-insensitivity account is correct, the vice of pride can be seen as a perversion of the desire for those good qualities that, precisely because they are so important, make one (or at least are perceived as making one) better *qua* person. Rather than wanting the values in question for their own sake, the prideful person wants them (or other characteristics she erroneously considers great-making) for the sake of surpassing others. If this is what Aquinas means when he calls pride “inordinate desire of one’s own excellence,” then the status-insensitivity account is in agreement with Aquinas.<sup>48</sup>

Importantly, the status-insensitivity account is able to recognize humility both in high achievers and in the deficient. People who have achieved their model identities qualify as humble if none of the satisfaction they feel from thinking about their excellent qualities and achievements comes from thinking of themselves as superior to other people. Such individuals may, like G. E. Moore and Aristotle’s *megalopsychos*, desire great things that elude most of us, but they are not drawn to these elusive pursuits because the pursuits, *qua* generally elusive, present themselves as opportunities for advancing the self ahead of others.<sup>49</sup> To understand how the status-insensitivity account is able to recognize humility in deficiency, we need only return to the case of Gary and consider what makes his admissions about his own failings so difficult. Most of us do not like the idea of other people surpassing us, and we particularly recoil at the idea that almost all other people are superior to us in any way that reflects on our personal worth. We even dislike the idea that others are superior to us in unimportant ways that we all would admit have little bearing on our personal worth!<sup>50</sup> Our first-person admissions often reflect our desires.

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of the members of the human species might become intelligent in excelling with regard to the sort of mental quickness that is appropriate to human beings.

<sup>48</sup>Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q 162, A 2. I believe that one can find some support for such a reading of Aquinas. This is not the only possible way of interpreting Aquinas, however, and I do not wish to take a stand on how best to interpret him on this issue.

<sup>49</sup>One might wonder if this means that humble people will never try to beat others at, say, a game of chess or in a race for Olympic gold and will rather simply desire to increase their own skills. My response is that a humble person can desire to win Olympic gold as such (and so desire to *beat* other people, i.e., to be superior to other people in a particular way) provided that the motivation for winning does not come from a belief or suspicion that winning in this way renders one superior to the defeated not just with regard to the practice at hand but in some deeper, more significant way (what I have been trying to capture with the language of personal worth).

<sup>50</sup>One explanation of this tendency is that most of us care very much about where we stand relative to other people on issues of personal worth, and while we also have a high confidence that, say, having the cutest child in the school play has no bearing on our personal worth, this confidence is imperfect. Such concern with issues one acknowledges to be trivial is thus analogous to buying fire insurance while having a high but imperfect confidence that one’s house will not burn down.

As a result, few of us are willing to be honest about ways in which we are substantially surpassed by others unless we have come to believe that the relevant ways in which others surpass us are unimportant or at least temporary. Gary's admissions about his own failures, made as they are without recourse to the self-assurance that "everything will be fine—this way in which others surpass me is only temporary; I am going to change," are morally impressive insofar as they involve resisting not only the desire to surpass others but also the (for most of us even stronger) aversion to others surpassing us. It takes a remarkable resistance to issues of status to make the admissions that Gary makes as he makes them, i.e., without the bitterness or resentment that comes from a disappointed preoccupation with rank. While not as extreme, we also observe resistance to status concerns in Gary's identifying with other addicted persons, apologizing to those whom he has wronged, and submitting to a sponsor. The status-insensitivity account of humility is able to recognize all of this: Gary begins his path toward humility as he actively resists concerns with status and achieves humility as this active resistance (a type of Aristotelian continence) gives way to unconcern and insensitivity.

Gary's attitude toward rank can be contrasted with an especially insidious version of the vice of pride that I will call, "democratic pride." In my use of the term, "democratic pride" is a pejorative and is not, say, a virtue of democratic societies. To understand the impulse of democratic pride, think of the person who "only" wants to be average, "like most people." A law school student who suffers from democratic pride might privately assure herself that she does not have a problem with the vice of pride because, unlike those obsessed with making the dean's list, she just wants to manage a respectable finish in the middle when the class rank list is announced. While it is possible that this is the limit of her aspirations, it is unlikely that the story ends here. What is more likely is that the reason she "only" aspires to the median is that she has reached a kind of uneasy peace with regard to her academic abilities relative to other students. She would still much prefer to wind up on top, but she recognizes this desire as unattainable. She tells herself she has accepted the limits of her abilities and that this is why she will not be disappointed when the usual suspects win the awards, so long as she avoids the dreaded bottom half. In reality, she has not so much accepted her rank as simply grown accustomed to her usual place in the pecking order. She is like a person who never really forgives someone in her past who wronged her but, thanks to the passage of time, has "cooled off" for long enough that she would say she is "over" the wrong. In the case of the wronged person, time rather than the virtue of forgiveness is what does the work of dampening the force of her memories and with them her once strong feelings of anger. In the case of the law student, getting used to not leading her class (and hence ceasing to expect to lead it), rather than the virtue of humility, is what dulls her felt aspirations to surpass others. If, however, the law student were to land at the bottom of the class list and accordingly become distraught, and if her

feelings of disappointment were about her rank relative to others as such and not, say, her lack of mastery of the subject matter or her poor job prospects, it would become clear that she does indeed suffer from democratic pride. She may assume that she only wants to be no worse than average, but her preoccupation with rank reveals that her contentedness with an average performance is uneasy: were she to become convinced of having a real shot at beating her peers, she, like the classically (viciously) prideful person, would try to do so for the sake of superiority.

One potential objection to the status-insensitivity account is that it grants virtuous humility too easily, considering anyone humble who has, over time, simply ceased to care about other people: what they think, how good they are on various measures, and by extension how one compares to them.<sup>51</sup> Insofar as this sort of indifference to one's place in the personal worth hierarchy is at best non-virtuous (because it is a non-moral typical result of, say, age) and at worst vicious (because it may involve indifference not just to one's rank relative to others but to other people themselves), humility should not be equated with unconcern with status.

A few things may be said in response to this line of objection. With regard to the, "it's only age, not genuine virtue" concern, recall the example of the law student who has grown accustomed to her usual middling rank and my point that one might cease to experience strong feelings for surpassing others while nonetheless preserving strong latent desires to do so. If this is the case, then one will not qualify as humble on the status-insensitivity account, since latent desires for dominance are still desires. If, however, one's life experiences have helped to remove even latent desires to surpass others (and aversions to being surpassed by others), then the status-insensitivity account will recognize the resulting character trait as virtuous humility. Perhaps such insensitivity to status is found more frequently among those more advanced in years, but it does not follow that insensitivity to status is not a genuine virtue.

What of the concern that the status-insensitivity account would designate as "humble" those people who simply do not care about other people (at all) and as a result do not care about their rank relative to anyone else? My response to this objection is to contest the suggestion that a vicious way of "not caring about other people" might naturally lead one to not care about one's rank relative to others. Note that simply not caring about the *well-being* of others is unlikely to make one not care about one's rank relative to others. It is hard to see how developing callousness about the welfare of my neighbors should make me comfortable with the thought that most of my neighbors are smarter, stronger, wittier, or more virtuous people than I. A different vicious form of "not caring about other people" involves not caring about the opinions of others because one believes others to be beneath one. But this form of not caring should not be confused with status-insensitivity. Recall that the status I am discussing concerns one's

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<sup>51</sup>Thanks to Alex King and Michelle Mason for pressing this objection.

actual personal worth relative to others and not one's *socially-recognized* personal worth. A person who sincerely thinks "I don't care what anyone else thinks of me; all those other people are a bunch of stupid losers," will not qualify as humble on the status-insensitivity account; not caring what others think is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for humility on the status-insensitivity account. Moreover, thinking of people in terms of concepts such as "losers" suggests a decidedly status-concerned stance.

I have appealed to the example of Gary to support a modified version of Roberts and Wood's status-insensitivity account of humility, but the example is also significant in that it deepens the status-insensitivity account in the sense that it shows that humility's remarkable insensitivity to issues of status pertains not just to the concern with superiority (high status) but also the aversion to inferiority (low status). This insight indicates a way forward toward a more tolerant response to some of the apparently extreme admonishments concerning humility that one finds in the Christian tradition. The Christian humility tradition is ultimately concerned with spiritual formation, and if that tradition is correct, spiritual formation is a goal of such import (far more important than, say, sobriety) that achieving it would theoretically justify accepting *unwarranted* criticisms and treatment, even treatment that denies the basic dignity one shares with all humans, if ever necessary. Of course, what is necessary depends on the situation: courage does not require risking one's life when little is at stake, and humility likewise only prompts a relinquishment of one's rights if enough is at stake. Otherwise, such relinquishment is servile. (Recall Thomas Hill's claim that what makes servility objectionable is the fact that it involves a "willingness to disavow one's moral status, publicly and systematically, *in the absence of any strong reason to do so.*")<sup>52</sup> Benedict and Thomas à Kempis hold that there is a strong reason to be on a constant lookout for over-attachment to one's status: spiritual formation is both the greatest of goods and one that requires total worship of God. Preoccupation with even one's rightful status vis-à-vis others can inhibit the achievement of this goal and must be relinquished. To use my language, democratic pride must be rooted out as the insidious vice and impediment to flourishing that it is. Moreover, if we grant an Aristotelian approach to moral development on which hitting the mean often requires aiming beyond it, we should not be surprised that extreme measures are required for inculcating a moral orientation that is utterly unconcerned with rank. One can certainly disagree with these writers on the ultimate good for human persons and/or what the achievement of that good requires. My point is simply that once we recognize that disagreement, the practical advice of such writers, while still extreme in its prescriptions, can no longer be easily dismissed as disparaging of human beings or extreme *in toto*. The prescriptions are aimed at the good of the individual in much

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<sup>52</sup>Hill, "Servility and Self-respect," 85, emphasis mine.

the way that Gary's decision to make amends to those in his past is aimed at his own long-term good.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Thanks to Anne Jeffrey, Alex King, Lisa Kretz, Michelle Mason, Adam Peterson, Teddy Ray, and the referees and editor of *Faith and Philosophy* for comments on previous versions of this paper. This paper benefited from The Mentoring Workshop for Pre-Tenure Women in Philosophy and a workshop on Fundamental Practices of Intellectual Humility sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation.

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