

THE DOXASTIC ACCOUNT OF INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

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ABSTRACT: This paper will be broken down into four sections. In §1, I try to assuage a worry that intellectual humility is not really an intellectual virtue. In §2, we will consider the two dominant accounts of intellectual humility in the philosophical literature—the *low concern for status* account the *limitations-owing* account—and I will argue that both accounts face serious worries. Then in §3, I will unpack my own view, the doxastic account of intellectual humility, as a viable alternative and potentially a better starting place for thinking about this virtue. And I'll conclude in §4 by trying to defend the doxastic account against some possible objections.

KEYWORDS: intellectual humility, intellectual arrogance, intellectual servility

Introduction: A Non-Starter?

In May of 2012, I was hired as a Research Fellow at the Fuller Graduate School of Psychology, in Pasadena California. I was hired as a philosophy post-doc on a major research and funding initiative on “The Science of Intellectual Humility.” To be honest, I hadn’t thought much about intellectual humility before. While my doctoral thesis focused on virtue epistemology, most of my work was on virtue-reliabilism¹ with relatively little focus on character virtues in general and none on the specific virtue of intellectual humility. So, naturally, one of the first questions I ended up asking during my time at Fuller was, “What is intellectual humility?”

While perhaps someone could develop a theory rich definition of intellectual humility by drawing from the mountains of literature on humility in general, the nature of intellectual virtues, or virtue epistemology, I decided—at least in the first instance—to start from my first impressions. Humility, it seemed

¹ See, for example, John Greco, “Knowledge and Success from Ability,” *Philosophical Studies* 142, 1 (2009): 17–26; John Greco, *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); John Greco, “A (Different) Virtue Epistemology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, 1 (2012): 1–26; Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ernest Sosa, *Reflective Knowledge: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ernest Sosa, *Knowing Full Well* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

to me, is a virtuous mean between arrogance and servility. The humble person doesn't think too highly of themselves (which would be arrogance) nor do they think too little of themselves (which would be something like servility, self-deprecation, or diffidence). Instead, it seemed to me that the humble person would think of themselves—*value themselves*—as they ought.

As rough and simple as that account of humility might be, I thought an intuitive account of intellectual humility naturally fell from it. Perhaps *intellectual* humility is also best thought of as a virtuous mean, between something like *intellectual* arrogance and *intellectual* servility. The intellectually humble person, so I thought, doesn't think too much of their beliefs (which would be intellectual arrogance) or do they think too little of their beliefs (which would be intellectual servility). Instead, it seemed to me that *the intellectually humble person would value their beliefs as they ought*.² What does this “valuing” amount to? Well, if you value something, then typically hold on to it and you don't let it go. So, for my very first attempt, I construed intellectual humility as the virtue of holding onto a belief as long as it's merited, in accord with how much value the belief enjoys by way of evidence, justification, or warrant.³

And this seemed to me like an initially plausible account of what intellectual humility might be. After all, it seems right to think that a quintessentially intellectually arrogant person would be someone who is completely unwilling to change her belief in the face of evidence, disagreement, or defeat. Likewise, it seems right to think that a quintessentially intellectually *servile* person would be someone who holds his beliefs loosely and revises or changes them at the proverbial drop of a hat. Intellectual humility, the thought was, would amount to holding beliefs as firmly as you ought. While my colleagues and I found that such a definition to have some resonance with folk conceptions of intellectual humility⁴ and empirical research on dual-process theory,⁵ it was unceremoniously dismissed as a “non-starter” by other theorists—claiming that

² But why focus on valuing *beliefs* and instead of valuing *intellectual capacities*? While I am indeed attracted to the idea of re-imagining intellectual humility in this way, we might worry that a single intellectual capacity can produce both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant beliefs. Focusing on beliefs allows us to easily make this distinction.

³ See, for example, our discussion of intellectual humility in Peter L. Samuelson, Matthew J. Jarvinen, Thomas B. Paulus, Ian M. Church, Sam A. Hardy, and Justin L. Barrett, “Implicit Theories of Intellectual Virtues and Vices: A Focus on Intellectual Humility,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 10, 5 (2015): 65.

⁴ See Samuelson et al., “Implicit Theories.”

⁵ See Peter L. Samuelson and Ian M. Church, “When Cognition Turns Vicious: Heuristics and Biases in Light of Virtue Epistemology,” *Philosophical Psychology* 28, 8 (2015): 1095–1113.

the view is far too “general” to be “identical with anything as specific as [intellectual humility].”⁶

While having the view rejected in this way might have facilitated personal insights into *intellectual humiliation*, it didn’t do much to help me better understand *intellectual humility*. After all, I’m not at all put off by the idea that intellectual humility could be a very broad meta-virtue, so the worry that my proposed account was too general to be intellectual humility was more or less ineffectual. Nevertheless, while I don’t think the view that intellectual humility is roughly *valuing your beliefs as you ought* is a non-starter; it is, I heartily agree, under-described and in need of elucidation and modification. And that’s what I aim to accomplish in this paper. Given its specific focus on *beliefs*, the view that I’ll ultimately be unpacking and defending is what I’m calling the *doxastic account of intellectual humility*.

This paper will be broken down into four sections. In §2, we will consider the two dominant accounts of intellectual humility in the philosophical literature—the *low concern for status* account⁷ the *limitations-owing* account⁸—and I will argue that both accounts face serious worries. Then in §3, I will unpack the doxastic account of intellectual humility as a viable alternative and as potentially a better starting place for thinking about this virtue. And I’ll conclude in §4 by trying to defend the doxastic account against some possible objections. But before we get started on all of this, it’s worth asking ourselves some preliminary questions. First of all, are we safe in assuming that intellectual humility really is an intellectual virtue? We naturally assume that it is, but how safe is that assumption? In §1, we briefly consider these questions.

§1: Is Intellectual Humility a Virtue?

It’s easy to assume that intellectual humility is an intellectual virtue. And to be sure, that seems like a fairly safe assumption to make. Arguably, the onus is on anyone who wants to convince us otherwise; in other words, unless we have good

⁶ Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91, 1 (2015): 4.

⁷ See Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, “Humility and Epistemic Goods,” in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives From Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 257–279; Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

⁸ See Whitcomb et al., “Intellectual Humility.”

reason to think otherwise, we're probably safe to assume that intellectual humility is indeed an intellectual virtue.⁹

That said, however, good reason to think otherwise might be forthcoming—specifically from empirical research. What if we discovered, for example, that intellectual humility was an evolutionary or biological vice? What if we discovered that people who are intellectually humble are less likely to be happy, are less ambitious, less successful, and are less likely to reproduce? Somewhat disturbingly, recent empirical research seems to suggest that intellectual arrogance might be deeply rooted in human psychology. Human beings are notoriously (and apparently naturally) disposed to over-estimate their intellectual strengths and under-estimate their weaknesses; indeed, the evidence is clear that there is a strong tendency even to under-estimate our liability to such biases. And insofar as overestimating one's intellectual strengths and underestimating one's intellectual weaknesses are incompatible with intellectual humility, it's easy to think that these biases show a natural tendency away from intellectual humility. Furthermore, we are susceptible to all sorts of biases that make intellectual humility difficult. For example, we tend to favour evidence or data received early in our inquiries (primacy bias), and we tend to discount the weight of evidence that counts against hypotheses we endorse (confirmation bias). Second, evolutionary psychologists have offered some intriguing arguments that these dispositions are embedded within our cognitive architecture in ways that can systematically lead us to biased thinking, in some cases for adaptive reasons. Third, some clinicians have argued that intellectual arrogance is necessary for maintaining mental health. The intellectual humble, who see themselves and their condition with unmitigated clarity, are more susceptible to forms of depression, for example. But if this is right, then it begins to look like intellectual humility might be a biological *vice!* And we might seriously wonder: can something be a biological vice and still be considered an intellectual virtue?

If intellectual humility is indeed a biological vice, and if we generally want intellectual virtues to be good for people in some significant way—a way that is sensitive to our biological needs and our evolutionary design—then there is a serious worry here that intellectual humility cannot be an intellectual virtue.¹⁰ To

⁹ To be sure, however, the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition in Western thought surely contributes to why we intuitively see intellectual humility as an intellectual virtue. The ancient Greeks, for example, arguably would not share in this assumption.

¹⁰ To be sure, even altruistically-oriented virtues arguably are good for people from a biological / evolutionary point of view. Take, generosity as an example. If people are *generous* with their resources, then the entire community will be more resilient and able to guarantee reproductive success for its members.

be sure, intellectual virtues qua intellectual virtues are often taken to aim at truth, and moral virtues qua moral virtues are often taken to be aimed at some form of the good. As such, perhaps the worry that intellectual humility is a biological vice—such that it leads to a *decrease* in the overall well-being of an agent—isn't really a worry that intellectual humility isn't an *intellectual* virtue. So long as intellectual humility really does help agents reach the truth, then perhaps it can still be an intellectual virtue even if it is a biological vice.¹¹ But that feels somewhat like an awkward position to be in—to hold something as an intellectual virtue even if it is bad for us at a biological or evolutionary level. And insofar as we want to see intellectual virtues as a subset of moral virtues—as some prominent theorists do¹²—then such a response may not be available to us.

Thankfully, however, the worry that intellectual humility might be a biological vice—and subsequently *not* an intellectual virtue—can be assuaged in other ways. First of all, having a view of intellectual humility as a virtuous mean—as the virtue between the vices of intellectual arrogance and intellectual diffidence—seems to dissolve the worry. For example, ease of measurement in empirical research often drives a view of intellectual humility that simply views it as the opposite of intellectual arrogance.¹³ But such measures struggle to pull apart the distinction between being intellectually humble and being intellectually servile. So just because people who *lack intellectual arrogance* are more likely to suffer from depression, doesn't mean that *intellectually humble* people are more likely to suffer from depression. Perhaps some of those who lack intellectual arrogance aren't intellectually humble, perhaps they are intellectually self-deprecating, diffident, or servile. Second of all, there is a growing body of research that suggests that intellectual humility is a tremendous biological virtue. Psychologists have discovered traits and behaviours associated with intellectual humility that facilitate learning, personal growth, and social interaction. Being an arrogant jerk, unsurprisingly, generally causes social ostracization. While we

¹¹ Our focus, here, is whether or not intellectual humility can be conceived of as an intellectual virtue. There is, to be sure, a much broader worry in the literature: whether, given our natural proclivity toward heuristics and biases, intellectual virtues are possible for creatures like us (see Mark Alfano, “Expanding The Situationist Challenge To Responsibility Virtue Epistemology,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 62, 247 (2012): 223–249.) This is a serious worry, but it is not my focus here. For an explanation as to how virtue epistemology can account for and make sense of our proclivity toward heuristics and biases, please see Samuelson and Church, “When Cognition Turns Vicious.”

¹² See Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹³ The issue of measuring intellectual humility will come up again in §4.

might be able to think of arrogant jerks that have achieved success seemingly *by being* arrogant jerks—usually television personalities, political pundits, etc.—being an arrogant jerk does not *generally* lend itself to broad personal, holistic thriving. For the time being, at least, I think we can put the worry that intellectual humility might be a biological vice on the shelf; the research doesn't ultimately seem to support such a conclusion at this time. And as such, following our intuitions and lacking significant reason to think otherwise, let's continue to assume that intellectual humility is indeed an intellectual virtue.

§2: Current Definitions

Working under the assumption that intellectual humility is indeed a virtue, I think we have strong motivation to try to define it. And over the past thirteen years, two dominant accounts of intellectual humility have emerged out of the philosophical literature. In this section, we will consider these two dominant accounts of intellectual humility and highlight a few worries facing them. Now, the goal here is not to show that these accounts are necessarily wrong—it might very well be possible to intelligently and cogently disarm the worries I'll raise. Nevertheless, I hope that highlighting some of the worries facing contemporary accounts of intellectual humility might (i) give us a snapshot of the on going debate about intellectual humility and (ii) incline us to consider an alternative account, specifically what I've been calling the doxastic account of intellectual humility, with new interest.

The two accounts of intellectual humility that we're going to consider are: the low concern for status account¹⁴ and the limitations-owning account.¹⁵

Let's start with the former: the low concern for status account of intellectual humility. In their 2003 article "Humility and Epistemic Goods" and their 2007 book *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*, Robert Roberts and Jay Wood give us what is the seminal account of intellectual humility in the literature. According to their account—the low concern for status account—intellectual humility is viewed as merely the opposite of "intellectual arrogance" or "improper pride." According to Roberts and Wood, these vices are centred on promoting the social wellbeing of the possessor. As such, intellectual humility is "a striking or unusual unconcern for social importance, and thus a kind

¹⁴ Advocated by Roberts and Wood in "Humility and Epistemic Goods"; *Intellectual Virtues*.

¹⁵ Advocated by Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder in "Intellectual Humility." Another account of intellectual humility that is worth considering, which I sadly did not have time to discuss in this paper, is Alessandra Tanesini, "Intellectual Humility as Attitude," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 93, 1 (2016).

of emotional insensitivity to the issues of status.”¹⁶ The thought here is that the intellectually humble person isn’t concerned about the status that might be accrued via pursuing various intellectual endeavours. Instead, they pursue intellectual goods for their own sake.

And there are quite a few things to like about this view—for example, it seems to rightly highlight a social dynamic to the virtue—but, I think, it also has some serious problems. The first question we might have is: can’t someone be too humble? As I noted in the introduction, I think we generally tend to think of intellectual humility as a virtue, between intellectual arrogance on the one hand, and something like intellectually servility on the other. Someone, it seems, can be *too* humble, they can be so self-deprecating and so self-lessening that they’re vicious (not virtuous). However, since the low concern for status account sees intellectual humility as merely the opposite of intellectual arrogance, then it’s not clear how it can capture this idea.

And as we saw in §1, whether or not intellectual humility is understood as a virtuous mean can significantly shape empirical research on intellectual humility and its conclusions. Again, if we view intellectual humility as merely the opposite of vices like intellectual arrogance and improper pride, then there is a real worry that empirical research will suggest that intellectual humility isn’t a virtue but a biological vice. Again, some clinicians have argued that intellectual *arrogance* is necessary for maintaining mental health, because the intellectual humble, who see themselves and their condition with unmitigated clarity, are more susceptible to forms of depression. But insofar as it’s difficult to see how something could be an intellectual virtue while being a biological vice, I think this is a conclusion that Roberts and Wood would want to reject. A good way to reject it, as I suggested in §1, is to think of intellectual humility as a virtuous mean. The argument could be made that the only reason clinicians think intellectual humility is more likely to lead to depression is because they are lumping intellectual humility in with intellectual servility, which is giving them this misleading result. Given that the low-concern for status account doesn’t view intellectual humility as a virtuous mean, an advocate of such a view cannot make this argument.

In addition to the problematic conclusions such a view leads to if adopted by psychologists, I think we can also make the case that it’s simply counterintuitive to think of intellectual humility as *merely* the opposite of vices like intellectual arrogance. Consider the following example:

DERMATOLOGY: Paul is a highly acclaimed dermatologist with a litany of medical achievements and an almost unmatched knowledge of skin cancer;

¹⁶ *Intellectual Virtues*, 239.

however, Paul cares nothing for social status or the accolades of his peers. Saul, on the other hand, is a medical student and a novice dermatologist at best. (Saul's father is extremely wealthy, and essentially bought Saul's place in medical school). Truth be told, Saul is a bit of a dolt. But to make matters worse, Saul is fiercely obsessed with his status and deeply intimidated by Paul's accomplishments, which regularly results in Saul being antagonistic toward Paul. One day, Saul is shadowing Paul at the clinic when they see a patient with an odd looking mole. Paul looks at the mole and thinks that it looks suspicious enough to warrant further testing. Saul, aiming to be antagonistic to Paul, resolutely denies that the mole looks worrisome at all. Caring nothing for his intellectual status and accolades (or Saul's lack of status), Paul takes Saul's dissent seriously and treats him as an intellectual peer.

If Paul is caring so little for status that he fails to recognize his expertise over and against Saul's ignorance and takes his dissent seriously, treating him like a peer, then perhaps Paul is being too humble here. Actually, we might think that it's *vicious* (and not virtuous) for Paul to take Saul to be a peer when it comes to dermatology and the status of their patient's mole. But given that intellectual humility is seen as merely the opposite of intellectual arrogance, it is not clear how the low concern for status view of intellectual humility could account for this idea: that someone can be *too intellectually humble*.

Another worry facing the low concern for status account of intellectual humility arises when we consider scenarios where there is no social status to be had or cared about. While intellectual humility plausibly has an important social dimension, the low concern for status view seems to make a social context absolutely essential. Consider another scenario:

NO STATUS: Let's say that tragedy has befallen Saul—the ignorant, yet conceited wannabe dermatologist—and he has been shipwrecked on a small deserted island. He is entirely alone. And with no social status to care about, Saul can no longer be obsessed with his status amongst his peers and how much they think of him.

According to the low concern for status account of intellectual humility, Saul, given that he is trapped on his deserted island with no social status to care about, cannot help but be intellectually humble. If there's no status to be cared about, Saul cannot help but have a low concern for his social status.¹⁷ And what is more, it is conceptually impossible for Saul to be intellectually arrogant according to this view, because, being intellectually arrogant requires a concern for social status and there is no social status to be concerned about on Saul's deserted island.

¹⁷ Note: if you think that Saul's previous social environment is still relevant, simply re-imagine the case to make Saul as alone as you please, devoid of any social status to be concerned about.

Aside from creating a strange asymmetry regarding when someone can be humble or arrogant, such a scenario might also make the low concern for status view seem counter-intuitive. It seems like as Saul the dermatological dunce sits alone on his deserted island, telling himself that all of his dermatological judgements are right and true, *he could be intellectually arrogant*. But, worryingly, that's not a possibility that the low concern for status view seems to allow.

Let's now turn to consider the limitations-owning account of intellectual humility. According to this view, intellectual humility is a "proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one's intellectual limitations."¹⁸ As Whitcomb et al. summarize: "When life calls for one to be mindful of a limitation, then, and only then, will it appear on the ideally humble person's radar. And what goes for humility in general goes for [intellectual humility] in particular."¹⁹ And, thankfully, this means that intellectual humility isn't just the opposite of intellectual arrogance; it's a virtuous mean! If you are completely oblivious to your intellectual limitations, then, on this view, you will be intellectually arrogant. Whereas, in contrast, if you are *overly* attentive to and owning of your intellectual limitations, then, on this view, you will be intellectually servile. You will be "too humble" so to speak. So it doesn't fall victim to the same sort of worries we saw with Paul the dermatologist.

That said, however, the limitations-owning account of intellectual humility faces its own unique set of worries. Vices like intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility are sensitive to both intellectual strengths *and* intellectual limitations, on this view; if you fail to recognize your limitations *or* over own or attend to your strengths you will be intellectually arrogant. And if you fail to recognize your strengths *or* over-own or attend to your limitations you will be intellectually servile. *But, according to the limitations-owning account, intellectual humility is only sensitive to the attending to and ownership of intellectual limitations.* Intellectual humility, on this view, is *blind* to intellectual strengths. And this leads to some results that I'm not sure we should own in a viable account of intellectual humility. Let's consider two of these worries.

The first worry is that the limitations-owning account of intellectual humility allows people to be intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant about the same thing at the same time. Someone just needs to be duly attentive to and owning of her intellectual limitations but radically overestimating and bragging about her intellectual strengths. And insofar as someone is intellectually

¹⁸ Whitcomb et al., "Intellectual Humility," 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

arrogant if they radically overestimate and brag about their intellectual strengths, then it looks like the limitations-owning account leads to this odd conclusion: it's possible for someone to "be at once intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant."²⁰ And that might seem like a straightforward reason to reject the view. The inability to rule out someone being at once intellectually arrogant and intellectually humble is a limitation that we may not want to own in our accounts of intellectual humility.²¹

Of course, a defender of the limitations-owning view might argue (as Whitcomb et al. do) that such a result is metaphysically impossible for an agent who is "fully internally rational."²² In other words, someone might argue that if I'm appropriately attending to and owning of my intellectual limitations, then, if I'm *fully internally rational*, I simply *can't* over-estimate my intellectual strengths. Conversely, if I am over-estimating my intellectual strengths, then, if I'm *fully internally rational*, I simply can't be intellectually humble—I can't appropriately attend to and own my intellectual limitations.

Such a response, however, might seem initially unsatisfactory because, sadly, most of us are less than fully internally rational. So, such a response doesn't do anything to disarm the result that most everyone can be at once both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant. But what is more, even if we *grant* that it'd be metaphysically impossible for a fully internally rational agent to be both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant, we might still worry that, pre-theoretically, intellectual humility should just be *incompatible* with being simultaneously intellectually arrogant. Just imagine someone said to you: "You need to meet Christopher! He's such a kind and humble guy. Watch out, though, he's an arrogant jerk." You'd think whoever said this just contradicted themselves! You wouldn't think, "Well, I guess Christopher must be less than fully internally rational." You'd think that whoever said such a thing is either using "humble" and "arrogant" in an extremely unusual or unorthodox way, or that they simply don't understand the words that they're using. It seems like there is something wrong or counter-intuitive with a definition of intellectual humility that does not preclude someone—even a less than fully internally rational someone—being at once

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ To be sure, there isn't anything counterintuitive about the possibility of someone being intellectually arrogant within one domain (say, facts about basketball) and intellectually humble within another (say, astrophysics). The problem arises when a view allows for someone to be intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant *within the same domain*.

²² Whitcomb et al., "Intellectual Humility," 25.

intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant. And if the limitations-owning view gives us such a definition, then that seems like a serious strike against it.

Unfortunately, that's not the only worry facing the limitations-owning view; there is a different but related worry lurking in this neighbourhood: the limitations-owning account of intellectual humility not only allows for someone being at once intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant, it also allows for someone being at once intellectually humble and *intellectually servile*. Remember, intellectual servility is sensitive to both intellectual limitations and intellectual strengths on this view—where someone can be intellectually servile by *either* over owning / attending to their limitations or by under owning /attending to their strengths. But, remember, intellectual humility, is *blind* to intellectual strengths. As such someone could appropriately attend to and own their intellectual limitations (and be intellectually humble) while completely failing to attend to their corresponding intellectual strengths (which would make them intellectually servile).

And it's worth noting that appealing to fully internally rational agents doesn't seem to be *any* help in this case. Even if a fully internally rational person can't appropriately attend to and own their limitations while overestimating their strengths, it's not at all clear that a fully internally rational person can't appropriately attend to and own their limitations while simply failing to attend to their strengths. There is nothing irrational about not attending to the logical consequences of one's beliefs.

The two leading theories of intellectual humility in the philosophical literature each face two worries. The low concern for status view faces (i) worries about the possibility of someone being too humble and (ii) worries about scenarios devoid of social status. And the limitations-owning view faces worries about (i) allowing for cases where someone can be at once intellectually humble and intellectual arrogant and (ii) allowing for cases where someone can be at once intellectually humble and intellectually servile. To be sure, I don't intend for these worries to be knock-down arguments against these views (again, there might be viable ways to disarm them); however, I raise these worries to help motivate the search for another, alternative account of intellectual humility. In the next section, I'm going to explore one such alternative: *the doxastic account of intellectual humility*.

§3: An Alternative Definition

I think intellectual humility is important. All too often, when faced with difficult questions, people are prone to dismiss and marginalize dissent. And around the

world, politics is incredibly polarizing and, in some places, extremely dangerous. And whether it's Christian fundamentalism, Islamic extremism, or militant atheism, religious dialogue remains tinted by a terrifying and dehumanizing arrogance, dogma, and ignorance. And if intellectual humility is that relevant and important, then we should be motivated to figure out what such a virtue could be. In the previous section, we considered two leading philosophical accounts of intellectual humility, and highlighted some worries that face them. In this section, I want to give a brief sketch of an alternative, philosophical account of intellectual humility, which I (humbly) hope such an account might serve as a better starting place for understanding this virtue.

As I said before, the account I want to explore is not theory-rich. I just want to follow our intuitions, stake a claim, and ultimately see how it holds up against criticism. Think of the act of creating a pot on a potter's wheel. At the beginning, you have a rough and messy lump of clay, which you then throw on the wheel and try to make something a bit nicer. In the introduction to this paper, I noted how according to my earlier view intellectual humility is best thought of as a virtuous mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility. The intellectually humble person, so I thought, doesn't think too much of their beliefs (which would be intellectual arrogance) or do they think too little of their beliefs (which would be intellectual servility). Instead, it seemed to me that *the intellectually humble person would value their beliefs as they ought*. While not a non-starter, such an account of intellectual humility is indeed a very rough and messy piece of clay, so to speak. In this section, I want to shape that clay a bit further to see if we can make something out of it. And, running with the metaphor, in the next section we'll see if what we make explodes in the kiln when faced with objections.

As I said, we might easily imagine that intellectual humility is the virtuous mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility. The intellectually humble person, then, doesn't overly value her beliefs (intellectual arrogance) nor does she under-value them (intellectual servility). Instead, she values her beliefs, their epistemic status, and her intellectual abilities as she ought. Let's call this basic, messy view DOXASTIC ACCOUNT:

DOXASTIC ACCOUNT: *Intellectual humility is the virtue of valuing one's own beliefs as he/she ought.*

A rough piece of clay, indeed. Perhaps the first thing we will want to know is what this "valuing" amounts to. We might easily wonder, for example if this *valuing* has something to do with how firmly someone holds a given belief—how resistant a given belief is to revision or relinquishment. And to some extent, that

would make a lot of sense. After all, it seems right to think that an intellectually arrogant person would be someone who is completely unwilling to change her belief in the face of disagreement or evidence to contrary. Likewise, it seems right to think that an intellectually servile person would be someone who holds his beliefs loosely and revises or changes them at the proverbial drop of a hat. Intellectual humility, then, would amount to holding beliefs as firmly as you ought.

While that was once my view, conflating valuing, in DOXASTIC ACCOUNT, with belief firmness leads to some serious problems. Consider the following scenario:

HYPOCHONDRIAC: Tim suffers mightily from hypochondria, and he knows this about himself. Nevertheless, whenever Tim has a headache he cannot help but believe that he has an aneurism in his brain. He's spoken to his doctor, he's had his head scanned thoroughly, and medical experts have confirmed that Tim's headaches are actually a product of tension in his neck (caused by his anxiety). Even though Tim knows that he has no good reason to think he has an aneurism in his brain (and that he has excellent reasons to think to the contrary), his hypochondria nevertheless makes his belief that he has a brain aneurism incredibly resilient.

In HYPOCHONDRIAC, Tim's belief is extremely firm. His hypochondria simply renders him psychologically unable to resist the belief that he has a brain aneurism. Is he being intellectually arrogant then? I don't think so, because he is entirely sensitive to all of the relevant reasons or evidence or justification against his belief and sensitive to the dearth of any reasons or evidence or justification in favour of his belief.

So perhaps the "valuing" in DA should not be a function of belief firmness. Maybe, instead, it should be some function of being sensitive to the relevant reasons or evidence or justification, for or against one's belief. Or, to use a catch-all phrase, we might say that intellectual humility is some function of being sensitive to the "positive epistemic status" for or against one's beliefs. So maybe we can shape our rough piece of clay a little bit along these lines. Consider the following revision:

DOXASTIC ACCOUNT': *Intellectual humility is the virtue of attributing positive epistemic status to one's own beliefs as he/she ought.*

Still a rough piece of clay, no doubt, but I think this might be getting somewhere. According to DOXASTIC ACCOUNT', if you attribute far more evidence, justification, or positive epistemic status to a belief than it merits, then

you are being intellectually arrogant about that belief. Conversely, if you attribute far less evidence, justification, or positive epistemic status to a belief than it merits, then you are being intellectually servile when it comes to that belief. Intellectual humility, on this view, is the virtue of attributing positive epistemic status to one's own beliefs as you ought—as the beliefs deserve.

But this still isn't entirely satisfying. First of all, what is determining the "ought" in DOXASTIC ACCOUNT"? In other words, can we say anything further to describe the normative component? And secondly, is "attribution" the right word to use for intellectual humility? After all, "attributing positive epistemic status" to a given belief seems like a highly reflective (System 2) activity, one that simply couldn't be done subconsciously. And insofar as that seems like an unnecessary restriction on intellectual humility, maybe we should consider a different term.

To address that first question (at least partially), it seems like the positive epistemic status (or evidence or justification) someone *ought* to attribute to their own beliefs is the positive epistemic status such beliefs *actually have*. So, at the very least, perhaps a doxastic account of intellectual humility should be most concerned with whether or not someone is accurately tracking—be it consciously or subconsciously—the positive epistemic status that their beliefs actually enjoy. And what is more, to address the second question, *accurately tracking* positive epistemic status, perhaps unlike *attributing* positive epistemic status, does not seem to require highly reflective activity; *accurately tracking* positive epistemic status, perhaps unlike *attributing* positive epistemic status, seems like the sort of thing that can be done implicitly and subconsciously.

With this in mind, we might shape our "clay" a bit further. Now consider DOXASTIC ACCOUNT":

DOXASTIC ACCOUNT": *Intellectual humility is the virtue of accurately tracking the positive epistemic status of one's own beliefs.*

On this view, if you think that one of your beliefs enjoys a tremendous amount of evidence, justification, or positive epistemic status when it actually *doesn't*, then you're intellectually arrogant about that belief.²³ And in contrast, if you think that one of your beliefs enjoys a paltry amount of evidence, justification, or positive epistemic status when it actually enjoys a tremendous amount, then

²³ The "thinking" involved here doesn't have to be deeply introspective navel-gazing. Someone might be extremely other-focused and outward looking when it comes to evaluating their beliefs (even if it's subconscious), and they can still satisfy the conditions for intellectual humility.

you're intellectually servile about that belief. Intellectual humility, again, is the virtue of accurately tracking the positive epistemic status of one's own beliefs.

While I think this all seems relatively intuitive, we still need to make some sort of caveat to DOXASTIC ACCOUNT'' in order to account for situations where someone has been non-culpably deceived—that is, deceived in a way that they cannot be blamed for. Consider another scenario:

REVIEWS: Aaron wants to buy a new cordless phone and is shopping online. He sees a particular model, the *Speak-Easy 3000*, that is in his price range, has all the features he's looking for, and has excellent reviews. Aaron orders the phone. And given that excellent reviews almost always reflect excellent quality, Aaron believes that he has just made an excellent purchase. Unbeknownst to Aaron, the company that makes the *Speak-Easy 3000* is profoundly dishonest and has programmed bots to comb through the reviews of all of their products to leave four compelling positive reviews for every negative review. As such, the reviews of the *Speak-Easy 3000* are drastically inflated and incredibly misleading.

In order for DOXASTIC ACCOUNT'' to rightly handle scenarios like this, we need Aaron's strong belief (i.e. belief which is taken to have a lot of positive epistemic status) to not count as intellectual arrogance simply because he was non-culpably deceived. However, someone might worry that since Aaron's belief is based on fabricated product reviews, that it enjoys far less positive epistemic status than Aaron imagines. To avoid such a worry, we can make a final adjustment to our clay, to the doxastic account of intellectual humility:

DOXASTIC ACCOUNT''': *Intellectual humility is the virtue of accurately tracking what one could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of one's own beliefs.*

And since Aaron is non-culpable in believing the fabricated reviews (given that online product reviews are usually reliable), DOXASTIC ACCOUNT'''' helps guarantee that Aaron won't be wrongfully ascribed with intellectual arrogance. According to this way of thinking, intellectual humility can be assessed along two axes: how much positive epistemic status a given belief enjoys, and how much positive epistemic status a given agent *thinks* (consciously or subconsciously) it enjoys. So, for example, if I ascribe my idiosyncratic religious belief with far more positive epistemic status than it really enjoys, then I'm guilty of intellectual arrogance. Alternatively, if I ascribe my belief that microwaves are safe with far less positive epistemic status than it really enjoys—perhaps because I perused the back-allies of the Internet and took the unsubstantiated anxieties of a blogger seriously—then I'm guilty of intellectual servility.

While there is certainly more work that needs to be done—in other words, there is certainly more shaping we could do to the lump of clay—I think this account of intellectual humility (what I've been calling the *doxastic* account of intellectual humility) can track our intuitions across a wide range of scenarios. And what is more, it does not seem to fall victim to the same worries that afflict the low concern for status or the limitations-owning accounts. Since the doxastic account represents intellectual humility as a virtuous mean and does not require a social context, then it does not fall victim to the same worries as the Low-Concern for Status account. And since the doxastic account does not afford scenarios where someone can be at once intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant *or* scenarios where someone can be at once intellectually humble and intellectually servile, then it does not fall victim to the same worries as the limitations-owning account. Does this mean that the doxastic account is the final word when it comes to intellectual humility? As much as I'd like to think so, there are plenty of serious worries we might have against the doxastic account that we haven't spoken to yet. Let's consider some now.

§4: Objections

I'd like to suggest (humbly, of course) that the doxastic account—specifically as expressed in DOXASTIC ACCOUNT"—is the best way to think about intellectual humility. But while the doxastic account is not vulnerable to the same worries that face the low-concern for status account or the limitations-owning account, it does seem to face its own serious worries. In the previous section, we shaped our rough piece of clay to see what we could make out of it; now we need to see if what we've made can stand against criticism. In this section, I try to address three of the major worries that have been levelled against the doxastic account of intellectual humility, arguing that we need not worry about them.

Worry 1: Is the doxastic account an account of intellectual humility?

Philosophers can disagree about nearly anything. So if a single philosopher finds something to criticize in my work, I may not worry too much (unless, of course, it just seems like a crushing objection). However, when I find that people are systematically, across contexts and audiences clustering around the same criticism, then I have serious reason for concern. And there *is* such a criticism facing the doxastic account; there is a worry that people do indeed seem to cluster around, and I am truly concerned. Namely, *is the doxastic account of intellectual humility really an account of intellectual humility?*

When presenting my account of intellectual humility, many philosophers seem to have the same sort of worry (though there are important difference): that perhaps I am not *really* talking about intellectual humility at all, that perhaps I am talking about another virtue and just calling it intellectual humility. Some (as we saw in the introduction) have worried that perhaps my account highlights a feature of intellectual virtues *in general* and that I'm not picking out intellectual humility *in particular*. Others have suggested that I am picking out a particular virtue, but that I'm really just talking about something like *intellectual honesty* and not intellectual humility. Similarly, in a Big Questions Online discussion, Jay Wood suggested that my proposed account is actually honing in on a virtue like *intellectual accuracy* or *intellectual firmness*, but not intellectual humility.²⁴

So, does this give us good reason to give up on the doxastic account of intellectual humility as an *actual* account of intellectual humility? I don't think so, not yet anyway. The philosophy of intellectual humility is currently something like a wild frontier. As Bob Roberts noted in his discussion summary for the Big Questions Online piece, "What is it to be Intellectually Humble?," "One of the most striking things to emerge from our discussion of intellectual humility is the lack of consensus on what 'humility' and 'intellectual humility' mean."²⁵ As the conversation develops, it has become manifestly clear that there is no shared or even entirely dominate view of intellectual humility in the literature; the low concern for status view is different from limitations-owning view, which is different from the doxastic view, etc. So it seems like the state of play right now is to try to stake a claim and defend it best you can! And that's what I am trying to do.

Of course, if there was consensus regarding what I'm confusing intellectual humility *with*, then perhaps I should still back off from my account. For example, if it was manifestly clear to everyone but myself that I was really talking about open-mindedness and not intellectual humility, then (even if there was no consensus regarding what intellectual humility actually is) I might yet worry that I've gotten something deeply wrong. But, as I've already noted, that's not the situation faced by the doxastic account. There is no consensus regarding what the doxastic account might be confusing intellectual humility with.

²⁴ See W. Jay Wood, "How Might Intellectual Humility Lead to Scientific Insight: Discussion Summary," *The Big Questions Online*, December 2012, <https://www.bigquestionsonline.com/node/177/comment/summary/all>.

²⁵ "What Is It to Be Intellectually Humble: Discussion Summary," *The Big Questions Online*, June 2012, <http://www.bigquestionsonline.com/node/135/comment/summary/all>.

Worry 2: What about a social dimension?

Recent empirical research (including some recent empirical research that I've had a hand in) seems to strongly suggest that folk conceptions of intellectual humility contain not only a doxastic/epistemic dimension but also a clear social dimension.²⁶ Intellectual humility, in the folk mind, often seems to be connected with how we engage with and treat other people. And that seems right. It is a serious worry for my account that it seems so very focused on the doxastic or epistemic dimension of intellectual humility, with seemingly no mention of a social element.

There are, I think, a few ways I might be able to respond to this worry. First, I could just back off on giving a 'full blown' account of intellectual humility and be content with the claim that the doxastic account is merely a *necessarily* condition on intellectual humility. Allowing that perhaps another condition could be added to it in order to account for a social dimension. Ultimately, what I want to argue in this paper is that whatever social or moral dimensions the virtue of intellectual humility might have, that it should be built alongside of or understood within the doxastic account.

Alternatively, I could take a less conciliatory approach and argue that it's not so obvious that intellectual humility really does have a social dimension. Think of someone who is completely socially oblivious, someone who finds the social world, social norms, and subtle social cues entirely baffling. Perhaps someone like Sheldon Cooper, from the television show the Big Bang Theory. Such a person, it seems, could have the very best of intentions, but come across to everyone as an arrogant jerk. And while I certainly can see that everyone might *think*, such a person is an arrogant jerk; it's not entirely clear to me that he truly *is* an arrogant jerk. My intuitions here are that such a person could do absolutely everything wrong on a social level and still have a heart of gold—a heart of intellectual humility.

Put it another way: In China, I'm told, tipping a waiter or waitress is an extremely jerky thing to do—the sort of thing you do only when you're looking to insult someone. In the US, in contrast, *not* tipping a waiter or waitress is an extremely jerky thing to do—the sort of thing you only do when you are looking to signify your sever distaste for the service you received. Now, if I didn't know about the social norms surrounding tipping in China, and I visited a restaurant and tipped handsomely for what I thought was excellent service, I would be considered a raging jerk. But would I really be a raging jerk? I don't think so. It

²⁶ See Samuelson et al., "Implicit Theories."

seems like my heart was in the right place, I just didn't know the social norms. To be sure, our actions often go hand-in-hand with our intentions—if I like the service at a restaurant I usually know what I should do in response—and that might explain why we tend to think intellectual humility has a social component. Usually, if someone is acting like a total, arrogant prig, it's because they *are* a total, arrogant prig! But I wonder if examples like these—the Sheldon Cooper example, and the China tipping example—might actually suggest that the so called “social dimensions” of intellectual humility are not actually necessary for intellectual humility.

Worry 3: The doxastic account cannot easily be empirically measured

In the first section of this paper, we saw how there can be tension between psychologists who want an account of intellectual humility that is easy to measure and philosophers who want to fully elucidate the virtue. I suggested that psychologists and clinicians who put forward an overly simplistic account of intellectual humility—viewing it as merely the opposite of intellectual arrogance, for the sake of easy measurement—were lead to an uncomfortable conclusion: that perhaps intellectual humility is not actually an intellectual virtue. As I suggested, however, once we see intellectual humility as a virtuous mean, we can plausibly expect these sorts of worries to disappear.

However, psychologists and clinicians might *now* be worried that the doxastic account is too complex to be of any use to scientists working on intellectual humility. The worry is that the doxastic account of intellectual humility is too complex to be empirically measured and used “in the real world” of the lab and the clinic. Consider the following quote from Don Davis and Joshua Hook's forthcoming paper:

Our main reaction to Church's model of [intellectual humility] was we struggled to understand how this model would work “in the trenches.” As researchers, we are interested in definitions and models of [intellectual humility] that lead to clear strategies for measuring the construct and developing an empirical research program. As clinicians, we are interested in how [intellectual humility] is perceived and judged in actual relationships and communities, such as religious discussions and interfaith dialogue...Church's definition of [intellectual humility] is complex. We call it a “goldilocks definition”: [intellectual humility] is not a unitary construct but rather the ‘just right’ combination of several constructs interacting with each other (e.g., whether or not someone was misled by false evidence). Complex definitions that include many moderators (i.e., qualifications) are difficult to measure, so we tend to prefer to simplify definitions and treat qualifiers as different constructs that may moderate the relationship between [intellectual humility] and other outcomes. As

psychologists, *we fear it may be impossible to define and measure this aspect of Church's model in a psychologically meaningful way.*²⁷

And this isn't a problem that is localized to intellectual humility. Many concepts that share interest across scientific and philosophical communities run into similar problems—with the scientists being unhappy with the scientific usefulness of armchair philosophical theorizing.²⁸

Now, since I like my armchair theorizing, let me try to say something against this sort of worry. Contrary to what Davis and Hook say, I would like to suggest that the complexities and limitations of the doxastic account actually enjoy *admirable* fit with the real world—and that demanding *less* from an account of intellectual humility actually doesn't account for what we find “in the trenches.” Life in the trenches, in the real world, is messy. It's complex. Properly understood, virtues are often going to be *extremely* difficult to viably measure across personality types, social dynamics, cultural contexts, etc. In giving an abstract and complex view of intellectual humility, it seems to me that *I am actually tracking the complexity we find in the trenches, in the real world.* When Davis and Hook complain that my account of intellectual humility is too complex to be easily measure, my *first* response is, “That's life in the trenches!” We shouldn't always expect virtues to yield easy measurements. Sure, we can give a simple definition of intellectual humility so that it yields easy measurements, but *if ease of measurement is what's driving our definitions, then there is a real chance our definitions won't fully capture the virtue.* Even if there is some insurmountable hurdle blocking a straightforward means of measuring intellectual humility as I've described it, that doesn't mean that there isn't plenty of extremely valuable measurement work to be done. For example, we might think that intellectual humility *largely* corresponds with the absence of dogmatism; as such, developing a straightforward measure along these lines would be extremely valuable and relevant. But, I think we'd simply be remiss if we tried to straightforwardly conflate intellectual humility with the absence of dogmatism. If we are going to try to develop an account of intellectual humility that applies across contexts, cultures, personalities, and belief types—from the belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ to political beliefs—then we are simply going to *need* an open-ended and sufficiently abstract account to work with. In the end, I consider it a *virtue* of my account that it provides a broad enough framework of intellectual humility that it can apply

²⁷ Don E. Davis and Joshua N. Hook, “Intellectual Humility in the Trenches: A Reply to Church,” *Biola University Center for Christian Thought* (forthcoming).

²⁸ The literature on the nature of trust is an excellent example of this.

across a full range of cases and track the complexities and stalemates of life “in the trenches.”

Conclusion

Far from being a “non-starter,” the doxastic account of intellectual humility seems to track our intuitions across a wide range of cases, and I’d humbly suggest that it is well situated to be an excellent starting place for understanding intellectual humility—perhaps as much if not more so than the other accounts in the contemporary literature. As we saw in §2, the low concern for status account of intellectual humility seems unable to make sense of the idea that someone can be too humble or situations that are devoid of any social status. Likewise, the limitations-owning view faced its own serious worries: allow for counter-intuitive situations where someone can be at once intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant and counter-intuitive situations where someone can be at once intellectually humble and intellectually servile. As such, in §3, I drew from some of my previous work and developed the doxastic account of intellectual humility, to stand as an account that avoided the problems faced by the other accounts. Of course, the doxastic account of intellectual humility faced its own, unique set of worries; however, in §4, I argued that such objections can be assuaged or otherwise mitigated.

Intellectual humility is a hot topic right now—with a host of philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and cognitive scientists taking up research projects centred around this topic—and it seems like an incredibly important virtue with significant real-world potential. It is important, then, that we do our theorizing or our empirical research from a good conceptual basis. It is my hope that the doxastic account of intellectual humility might be at least a small step in that direction.²⁹

²⁹ I would like to thank J. Adam Carter, Jesper Kallestrup, and Duncan Pritchard for their helpful comments. This work was supported in part by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.