

Part Ib: Is Intellectual Humility Compatible with Religious Dogmatism?

Ian M. Church

Hillsdale College, Saint Louis University, USA

The need for intellectual humility is perhaps most pressing when it comes to debates and disagreements surrounding religious commitments. All too often when faced with difficult religious questions people are prone to dismissing and marginalizing dissent. Around the world, religious debates are incredibly polarizing, and, in many parts of the world, extremely dangerous. And whether it's Christian fundamentalism, Islamic jihadism, or militant atheism, religious dialogue often remains tinted by a terrifying and dehumanizing arrogance, dogma, and ignorance.

So, let's agree: we need intellectual humility when it comes to religious beliefs and commitments. But what does this mean? Does intellectual humility preclude the possibility of religious dogmatism and firm religious commitments? Does intellectual humility require religious beliefs to be held with diffidence? What is intellectual humility anyway? There are two things I aim to do in this short article. First, I want to briefly sketch an account of intellectual humility. Second, drawing from such an account, I want to explore whether intellectual humility could be compatible with *virtuous* religious dogmatism.

What is Intellectual Humility?

Intuitively, intellectual humility is the virtuous mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual diffidence. The intellectually humble person doesn't value her beliefs too much nor does she value them too little. Instead, she regards her beliefs as she ought—valuing her beliefs, their epistemic status, her intellectual abilities as she ought. Or as a rough first approximation:

IH: Intellectual humility is the virtue of valuing one's own beliefs as he or she ought.

Now, we might easily think that this *valuing* amounts to how firmly someone holds a given belief, to how resilient a given belief is to revision or relinquishment. And to some extent, this makes 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, epistemic threat, or a defeater. Likewise, it seems right to think that an intellectually diffident 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.²³

That said, however, there are cases that suggest that belief firmness or a belief's resilience to revision or relinquishment are not essential metrics for intellectual humility. Consider the following case:

MOTHER: Conner has been charged and convicted of a series of extremely heinous crimes. And there is manifold evidence suggesting that Conner is indeed guilty. There is surveillance footage of Conner committing the crimes. There is Conner's personal journal that explains in detail his criminal plans,

23. This was once my view.

motivation, and intent. There are several eyewitnesses to Conner's crimes. Conner even confesses in full. All in all, Conner's trial is an easy, open-and-shut case. Nevertheless, Conner's mother, who loves him dearly, simply cannot bring herself to believe that Conner is guilty. She's seen the surveillance footage, she's read the diary, she's availed of all the relevant evidence against her son; indeed, she does not blame the judge, the jury, or the judicial system for convicting her son of these heinous crimes. Nevertheless, her love for her son bars her from believing that her son is guilty of such heinous crimes.

Conner's mother believes that her son is innocent, and this belief is extremely resilient to change or relinquishment. Indeed, there seems to be absolutely nothing that anyone could say or do to convince her that her son is guilty. Conner's mother presumably knows full well that her belief in her son's innocence has almost no justification or warrant, but, nevertheless, she cannot help but believe it. Is she being intellectually arrogant, then? I don't think so. As MOTHER makes clear, she adequately appreciates the manifold reasons why the jury found her son guilty as charged; however, it is the psychological inflexibility caused by her love that simply won't allow her to believe it.

Positive Epistemic Status

So if IH roughly amounts to how much someone *values* his or her beliefs, that value should not simply be a function of belief firmness. What cases like MOTHER seem to suggest, however, is that the value should actually track something like justification or warrant or, to be completely nonpartisan, *positive epistemic status*.²⁴ No doubt, how much positive epistemic status one attributes to their beliefs will often go hand in hand with how firmly they believe it. It seems natural to think that the intellectually arrogant person attributes far more positive epistemic status to her beliefs than she should. Likewise, it seems natural to think that the intellectually diffident person attributes far less positive epistemic status to her beliefs than she should. But what cases like MOTHER suggest is that attributions of positive epistemic status and belief firmness can and do occasionally come apart, and when they do it seems like what really matters when it comes to intellectual humility is the former.

But just what do I mean by positive epistemic status? I don't intend to commit myself or my account of intellectual humility on this score—at least not in this article. For now, let's let a thousand flowers blossom. Whether it's safety, sensitivity, evidence, reliability, character virtues, justification, defeasibility, or whatever, if it can give a belief positive epistemic status—or at the very least positive epistemic status that really matters—then IH should track it. With this in mind, perhaps we can now think of IH in terms of the following:

IH': Intellectual humility is the virtue of reliably tracking the positive epistemic status of one's own beliefs as he or she ought.

According to IH', attributing to a belief more positive epistemic status than it merits is akin to intellectual arrogance. Attributing to a belief less positive epistemic status than it merits is akin to intellectually diffidence. Only the intellectually humble, according to IH', are reliably tracking the positive epistemic status of their beliefs.

24. Terms like "justification" or "warrant" sometimes have epistemological baggage attached to them. Justification, for example, often seems attached to internalism. Warrant, for another, is often used as an umbrella term for whatever bridges the gap between true belief and knowledge. In this article, I don't want to make any such commitments. I want to develop an account of intellectual humility that can apply whether or not you are internalist or whether or not you're explicitly interested in knowledge. "Positive epistemic status" helps leave those doors open.

That said, we might need to make a final caveat to IH' in order to account for situations where someone has been non-culpably deceived. Consider the following case:

LIE: Mary has known Martha for many years and has always found her to be extremely trustworthy. One day, Martha is feeling a bit cheeky and decides to tell Mary a lie. Feigning a panic, Martha runs up to Mary and tells her that Mary's house is on fire. Naturally enough, since Mary has never known Martha to be anything but entirely honest, Mary non-culpably, yet falsely believes that her house is on fire and takes such a belief to have a lot of positive epistemic status (via Martha's testimony). And as such, Mary heads home in a hurry.

In order for IH' to rightly handle cases like LIE, we need Mary'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 she was non-culpably deceived. That said, however, someone might worry that—depending on how we cash out *positive epistemic status*—the fact that Mary's belief is false means that it enjoys far less positive epistemic status than Mary imagines. To avoid such a worry, we'll make a final adjustment to our account of intellectual humility:

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

And since Mary is non-culpable in believing Martha's testimony, IH'' helps guarantee that Mary won't be wrongfully ascribed with intellectual arrogance.

Now, I take IH'' as a good, rough and ready first approximation of intellectual humility.²⁵ But what does intellectual humility look like when it comes to religious beliefs? With an account of intellectual humility in hand, we are now ready to explore how a commitment to intellectual humility might affect our religious beliefs and convictions.

Intellectual Humility, Disagreement, and Religious Commitment

One of the biggest problems facing religious disagreement and debate is the prevalence of intellectual vice—specifically intellectual arrogance. All too often, the most vocal advocates of a given religious (or anti-religious) perspective are also the most viciously dogmatic, close-minded, and unflinchingly adamant in their views—attributing far more positive epistemic status to their beliefs than they usually merit. And such widespread vice all too often causes religious debates and disagreements to be completely intractable. In contrast, if *intellectual humility* were more widespread, then advocates of various religious (and anti-religious) perspectives would better track the positive epistemic status of their religious beliefs—when a given belief enjoys a lot of positive epistemic status and when a belief doesn't.

But when faced with a religious disagreement—especially disagreements with interlocutors who are equally familiar with the relevant data and just as intelligent, clever, rational, and so on—does intellectual humility oblige us to compromise on our religious beliefs, or otherwise revise them? We might easily think so. Given the tremendous religious diversity in the world—with an abundance of informed, intelligent, clever, rational people espousing almost every position—how could anyone be sure that *their* religious beliefs are right when so many able people disagree with them? Consider the following case from Hilary Kornblith's work, "Belief in the Face of Controversy":

25. To be sure, there are competing accounts of intellectual humility within the relevant philosophical literature (see Roberts and Wood, 2003, 2007). Given space constraints, however, I was not able to consider them here. In a fuller account, I would try to humbly (of course) suggest that IH'' is the best account of intellectual humility and enjoys several advantages over the relevant alternatives.

BILL: [S]uppose that you and I go out to a restaurant with a number of friends. After a large meal, the check comes and we agree to split the bill evenly. You and I are each quite good at mental arithmetic. I take a look at the bill and figure out what each person owes, and I put my share in the middle of the table. You look at the bill and figure out what each person owes and put your share in the middle of the table, and then we notice that we have put in different amounts. We are each well aware of the other's mathematical abilities, and we are each convinced of each other's honesty. At least one of us has made a mistake. It would be unreasonable for me to conclude that, since one of us has made a mistake, it must be you. The reasonable thing to do in this situation, and surely what most people in fact do in this situation, is suspend belief. We each go back to the bill and try to recompute the proper share.²⁶

We might think that religious beliefs are relevantly like BILL. We might think that the intellectually humble thing to do when faced with religious disagreement—given that it would be unreasonable and vicious for us to think our dissenting interlocutors somehow made a mistake and not ourselves—is to suspend belief. And since it's not obvious that we can just recompute religious beliefs (as in BILL), perhaps suspended belief is all we can reasonably hope for.

That said, there are cases of disagreement—even disagreement with our intellectual peers—where it seems as though we should stick to our proverbial guns, stand our epistemic ground, be dogmatically inflexible. Consider the following case:

SIMPLE MATH: Jill is a philosopher, working away in an office, when one of her colleagues, Jack, stops by to chat. Now, Jill considers Jack to be her epistemic peer—she has no reason to suspect that Jack is in any way less intelligent, educated, or clever than herself. Nevertheless, this day Jack surprises Jill with a shocking revelation. Jack confides in Jill that he has recently stopped believing that $2 + 2 = 4$. Now, if Jill knows anything, she knows that $2 + 2 = 4$. Does Jack's disagreement on this force Jill to reconsider her beliefs about basic arithmetic? Seemingly not. To all intents and purposes, Jill simply *cannot* give up on or significantly modify such beliefs. Such beliefs are too important and too consequential.

While legitimate peer disagreement in cases like BILL reasonably force the interlocutors to suspend, modify, or revise their respective beliefs, we can presumably agree that such a result does not seem virtuous in cases like SIMPLE MATH, in cases where the disagreement is over beliefs that are too precious, dear, central, foundational, and so on to revise or give up.²⁷ In cases like SIMPLE MATH, a dogmatic inflexibility seems virtuous. Even though our interlocutor in such cases is, by hypothesis, an epistemic peer, any claim to peerhood is seemingly lost once it becomes clear that they are sincerely and genuinely at odds with beliefs that are so central, so foundational, so consequential.²⁸ Being sincerely and genuinely at odds with such beliefs is crazy. And when an epistemic peer goes crazy, at least within a certain domain, they are no longer a genuine peer. In cases like SIMPLE MATH, dogmatism—an uncompromising stance regarding one's beliefs—seems entirely reasonable, seems virtuous.

In both cases, BILL and SIMPLE MATH, the protagonists could easily be intellectually humble according to IH". In both cases, the protagonists could be (and let's assume are) reliably tracking the positive epistemic status of their respective beliefs. This is an important realization to come to, because it shows us that being intellectually humble doesn't necessarily mean being conciliatory. *Someone can be intellectually virtuous, intellectually humble without suspending belief in the face of peer disagreement; someone can be intellectually humble while being dogmatic and*

26. Kornblith, 2010, p. 32.

27. Fumerton, 2010, pp. 95–96.

28. The tenants of basic arithmetic are presumably hinge propositions, "presupposed in the game of giving and asking for reasons" (Philia, 2009, p. 461), methodological necessities "whose truth is required, in a given context of inquiry, for the pertinent project of inquiry to proceed" (Brueckner, 2007, p. 285). To compromise on the basic arithmetic could be to compromise on the very framework of reason, and rationality is called into question.

uncompromising in one's beliefs. The question is: are *religious* disagreements more like BILL, such that the given religious beliefs should be suspended, or are religious disagreements more like SIMPLE MATH, such that religious beliefs can be held with a virtuous dogmatism?

Religious Beliefs and Positive Epistemic Status

While there is no easy or universal answer to this question—belief in supralapsarianism, say, is presumably in no way on par with the belief that God exists—I think we can make the case that some religious beliefs *could be* more akin to a belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ (as in SIMPLE MATH) than to a belief in one's share of a restaurant bill (as in BILL). I think we can make the case that some firm, unwavering religious commitments can be compatible with intellectual humility. What's the salient difference between the relevant, respective beliefs in BILL and SIMPLE MATH? I suggest that it is the positive epistemic status each belief enjoys. The belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ (in SIMPLE MATH) presumably enjoys nearly as much positive epistemic status as any belief possibly can. As such, whatever the epistemic import of peer disagreement, such disagreement cannot and should not shift a belief like $2 + 2 = 4$. In contrast, the belief based on a casual glance at a restaurant bill (as in BILL) surely does not enjoy anywhere near the same level of positive epistemic status; surely such a belief could and should be upset by peer disagreement.

Some religious beliefs—for example, beliefs like “God exists”—arguably enjoy a substantial amount of positive epistemic status. And, importantly, this positive epistemic status arguably doesn't need to come from theistic proofs or arguments. Just as we can “see” that $2 + 2 = 4$, many philosophers of religion (reformed epistemologists, in particular) would want to claim that we can just “see” that God exists. Most of us don't believe $2 + 2 = 4$ because of any arguments (though presumably we could produce some if need be); instead, however, we believe $2 + 2 = 4$ just because we see that it's true. In the same way, perhaps theists can claim to believe that God exists because we just see that it's true; no doubt, arguments could be given, if need be, but for at least some theists that's not what the belief's positive epistemic status rests on. *And if all this is right, then the religious belief that God exists might just be the sort of thing that we can believe with some virtuous dogmatism, with unwavering epistemic commitment while remaining intellectually humble.*

But wait. *Surely, this all depends on just how much positive epistemic status religious beliefs really do enjoy!* The value of various religious and anti-religious arguments is highly contested. And of course, atheists and agnostics are going to be *very* pessimistic regarding anyone's claim to just “see” that God exists. While intellectual humility highlights that it is theoretically possible to be in a position where someone could be virtuously dogmatic in one's religious (or anti-religious) beliefs, it is a tricky business knowing who is actually in such a position! That said, intellectual humility can also help us understand *why* this is so tricky, why religious debates are often so intractable.

Intellectual humility, according to IH¹, is assessed along two axes: how much positive epistemic status a given belief enjoys, and how much positive epistemic status a given agent *thinks* it enjoys. Consider Figure 1. If a belief enjoys only a very marginal amount of positive epistemic status (perhaps as in BILL), then intellectual humility requires that a given agent reliably track that modest positive epistemic status accordingly. In contrast, if a given belief enjoys a tremendous amount of positive epistemic status (as in SIMPLE MATH), then the intellectually humble agent will value such a belief—tracking its positive epistemic status—accordingly. Attributing too much positive epistemic status to a given belief would be vicious (intellectually arrogant, upper left-hand corner of Figure 1), and attributing too little would be vicious as well (intellectual diffidence, lower right-hand corner of Figure 1).

Religious Beliefs and Intellectual Vice

Part of what makes religious disagreements so intractable is that they involve beliefs that are extremely personal, consequential, and intimate—beliefs that are all too prone to being attributed

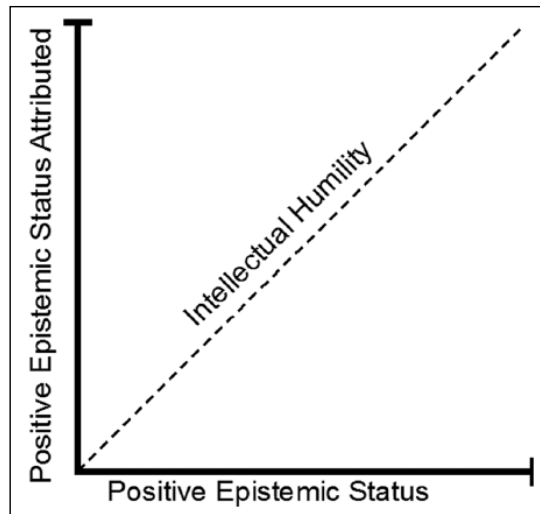


Figure 1. Intellectual Humility According to IH.

with a tremendous amount of positive epistemic status even when they shouldn't be. In cases like *BILL* and *SIMPLE MATH*, the protagonists roughly attribute the positive epistemic status that their respective beliefs merit—they were on the trajectory of intellectual humility. Some beliefs, however, are all too prone to intellectual vice, where the belief is taken to enjoy far more positive epistemic status than it actually does. Consider the following case:

RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT: Christy is a committed Christian. Most of her friends are Christians. She frequents Christian blogs and websites. And she is part of a broader Christian community. Abbey, however, is an atheist. Most of her friends are atheists. She frequents pro-atheist blogs and websites. And Abbey is part of a broader atheist community. Christy is a theist and believes in the authority of the Bible on moral topics. Abbey does not; she is quite convinced that there is no god, and she believes the Bible has no special moral authority whatsoever. Christy and Abbey are equally intelligent, clever, and discerning. Nevertheless, when Christy and Abbey discuss their differences in opinion and review all of the arguments both for and against their respective positions, they both remain unmoved.

For beliefs that are extremely personal, consequential, and intimate—beliefs regarding religion being archetypal—there can be a lot at stake.²⁹ The respective religious (and anti-religious) beliefs of Christy and Abbey in *RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT*, for example, deeply affect how they each view the world, what they read with the most attentiveness, who their closest friends are, and perhaps even who they trust the most.³⁰ Indeed, their religious beliefs are so near and so dear to them that giving them up could be almost as intellectually cataclysmic as giving up the belief that $2 + 2 = 4$.

Christy and Abbey take their respective religious beliefs to have a lot of positive epistemic status. Christy may very well think that her belief merits her strong commitment to Christianity,

29. For example, in the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul poignantly stresses that if Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead (i.e. if an essential pillar of the Christian faith is false) Christians “are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19, English Standard Version). In other words, Paul seems to be suggesting that Christians should be so affected by their Christianity that their lives should be supremely pitiable if Christianity is not true.

30. Of course, a belief does not necessarily need to be political, religious, or moral in order to deeply affect us. Presumably, given the right circumstances, almost any belief (e.g. a belief in the superiority of Apple computers, a belief in the perils of inorganic food, etc.) can be made surprisingly important for one's view of the world.

but, then again, Abbey may very well think that her belief merits *her* strong commitment to atheism. Additionally, given the positive epistemic status which Christy attributes to Christianity, she presumably thinks that Abbey's commitment to atheism is unmerited. Likewise, given the positive epistemic status with which Abbey attributes to atheism, she presumably thinks that Christy's firm commitment to Christianity is unmerited.³¹ Presumably, at least one of the interlocutors in cases like RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT is not intellectually humble—attributing more positive epistemic status to their religious beliefs than they merit. *The problem, of course, is determining who the culprit is.* Christy may, with regret, think Abbey is somehow intellectually misguided, perhaps chalking her strong dissent to the noetic effects of sin in the world. Likewise, Abbey may, with regret, think that Christy is actually the intellectually misguided one, perhaps chalking up her strong dissent as indicative of an intellectual crutch or reality-distorting indoctrination.

In SIMPLE MATH, the interlocutors are at odds about what they ought to believe regarding basic arithmetic. In BILL, the interlocutors are at odds about what they ought to believe regarding what everyone owes on a restaurant bill. In both of these cases, however, we can generally agree on how to handle them. The protagonist in SIMPLE MATH should stick to her proverbial guns and continue to believe that $2 + 2 = 4$. The interlocutors in BILL should withhold their beliefs until they can get a second glance at the bill. Cases like RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT, however, are far more intractable. Cases like RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT involve beliefs that are so personal, so consequential, and so intimate that *they are particularly and notoriously prone to intellectual vice.* Specifically, they are prone to being attributed with almost unmatched positive epistemic status even when it is ultimately unmerited—they are particularly and notoriously prone to being off the trajectory of intellectual humility.

And this makes our disagreements as to what positive epistemic status religious beliefs merit vast. All too often, we simply cannot agree on what the relevant data, arguments, evidence, intuitions, and so on merit, and all too often, we attribute any intellectual vice to our interlocutors rather than ourselves. More so than any of the cases considered prior, we cannot agree on what one ought to believe.³² As I've suggested, it's theoretically possible to be in a position where dogmatism regarding one's religious beliefs (particularly with potentially basic beliefs like "God exists") is virtuous; however, the proposed model of intellectual humility helps us see that it is difficult discerning when anyone is actually in such a position.

References

- Brueckner, Anthony. 2007. Hinge propositions and epistemic justification. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 88(3), 285–287. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0114.2007.00292.x.
- Fumerton, Richard. 2010. You can't trust a philosopher. In *Disagreement* (pp. 91–110). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kornblith, Hilary. 2010. Belief in the face of controversy. In *Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Philie, Patrice. 2009. Entitlement as a response to I–ii–III scepticism. *Synthese*, 171(3).
- Roberts, Robert C. & Wood, W. Jay. 2003. Humility and epistemic goods. In *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (pp. 257–279). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

31. And because of this they are likely to perceive each other as intellectually arrogant.

32. And presumably, what one ought to believe depends on what is ultimately true. Consider the RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT case. If Christianity is true, then perhaps Christy is perceiving God via her *sensus divinitatis*, and Abbey is being intellectually blind as a result of original sin. Conversely, if atheism is true, then Abbey via her enlightened faculties is able to escape the folk appeal of religious beliefs; Christy, however, is being intellectually blinded by her defunct commitments to superstition and myth. As such, it seems as though we cannot agree on what one ought to believe in cases like RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT, because, in part, we cannot agree on what is true.