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Vance Morgan

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# HUMILITY AND THE TRANSCENDENT

Vance G. Morgan

Over the past decade, several authors have attempted to define humility as a “secular” virtue that avoids any reliance on “religious” or transcendent metaphysical frameworks. In this article I argue that these attempts to define humility in cognitive and self-evaluative terms are largely misconceived. I use the work of Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil to argue that humility cannot be accounted for on exclusively naturalistic assumptions and to suggest ways in which transcendence might be reintroduced into the discussion of humility without immediately adopting the “religious” framework that contemporary work in humility is so critical of.

*The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are.*  
— Iris Murdoch<sup>1</sup>

*Without humility, all the virtues are finite. Only humility makes them infinite.*  
— Simone Weil<sup>2</sup>

Over the past decade, a number of discussions of humility has appeared in the philosophical literature.<sup>3</sup> On the face of it this seems odd, given that the popular conception of humility includes low self-esteem and underestimation (either intentional or unintentional) of one’s value and worth. It is difficult to see how such a trait could be a virtue or a valuable disposition to develop and nurture, since having a low opinion of oneself carries no obvious benefit to oneself or society at large. Indeed, such a trait would seem to facilitate contemptuous treatment and dismissal at the hands of others. As Stephen Hare writes, “humility thus understood seems at best a saving grace of the mediocre and at worst an excuse for passivity towards human wrongs.”<sup>4</sup>

Why, then, has humility traditionally been considered a virtue, imagined by some to be one of the greatest and most important virtues of all? One answer is that humility is a distinctively *Christian* virtue, one that makes sense primarily within the framework of Christian metaphysics. Norvin Richards describes this framework as follows:

This is a tradition according to which nothing that is good about you is to your own personal credit: such things are only the particular



gifts God chose to give you, for which you should be grateful but of which you cannot properly be proud. On the other hand, everything that is bad about you is your own fault, a way in which you personally have failed. If so, to have a high opinion of yourself would always be to overestimate yourself and to take credit where none was due. Properly humble individuals would take a dim view of themselves instead, because that would be the accurate view, the view which did not overestimate. Humility turns out to be a matter of having oneself in proper perspective; the idea that this perspective must be depressing rests on the tradition's further claims about the nature of human beings and their place in the universe.<sup>5</sup>

For many, perhaps most, this framework is controversial and by no means self-evident. Indeed, virtually all of the recent literature on humility rejects these metaphysical assumptions out of hand. Once these assumptions are jettisoned, either humility must be rejected as a virtue or it must be "secularized" so as to remove any trace of reliance on assumptions that G. F. Schueler describes as "utterly implausible" and likely to "find very few takers generally."<sup>6</sup>

My aim in this paper is to show that although the recent work on humility has been fruitful in several important ways, its attempt to define humility in cognitive and self-evaluative terms is largely misconceived. By removing from humility any meaningful reference to the transcendent, the core disposition that makes humility "one of the most difficult and central of all virtues"<sup>7</sup> is lost. After an investigation of important features of the recent literature on humility, I use the thought of Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil to construct an understanding of humility that draws its energy from what George Schlesinger calls "other-directedness . . . the ultimate source of all other characteristics that involve an impartial concern for worthy ideals and causes, and that require sympathy for the well-being of others."<sup>8</sup>

## I.

*Humility as a secular virtue . . . becomes an excellence of character within anyone's reach but one that is especially fitting to the most accomplished and admired persons.*  
— Stephen Hare<sup>9</sup>

Much of the recent work on humility begins by taking note of a logical puzzle that arises if one accepts the common definition of humility as "having a low estimate of oneself." If this definition is correct, in what sense is humility a virtue? On the hypothesis that there are persons who deserve legitimate merit and praise for their character and actions, for such persons to have a "low estimate" of themselves would seem to either require ignorance or a deliberate falsification of the truth. Neither of these alternatives is compelling. Unless one believes that no one ever truly deserves merit and praise, it is difficult to see how humility can logically be a desirable trait, since neither ignorance nor deliberate falsehood are good things.

In "The Virtues of Ignorance," Julia Driver addresses the above puzzle by arguing that there is "a class of virtues which involve ignorance in an

essential way" and proposes that modesty/humility is a paradigmatic case of such virtues.<sup>10</sup> Her *underestimation account* (UA) of modesty states that "the modest person underestimates his self-worth. If he speaks, then he understates the truth, but he does so unknowingly."<sup>11</sup> In other words, "modesty can be characterized as a dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth."<sup>12</sup> In a later discussion, Driver suggests that this "dogmatic disposition" arises because the modest person is one who "does not spend a lot of time ranking, who does feel the need to do so, and thus remains ignorant to the full extent of self-worth (to a limited extent)."<sup>13</sup> Even though the notion of "virtues of ignorance" strikes many as oxymoronic, Driver suggests that there are a number of valuable psychological states and instrumental goods that virtues such as modesty generate.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, insistence at the start that no virtue can include ignorance as a necessary condition "begs the question in favor of a strongly intellectualist account of virtue."<sup>15</sup>

UA has attracted few supporters, but is important because it, as well as alternative secular accounts, places humility in an evaluative context. Even though the modest person on Driver's account is ignorant of her true worth, she only counts as modest because there is an *accurate* evaluation of her worth that she fails consistently to make but that others can conceivably make. In other words, "this analysis of modesty . . . entails that an asymmetry exists between the self-ascription of the virtue and the other-ascription of it. I can ascribe the virtue to another, but I cannot coherently and sincerely ascribe it to myself."<sup>16</sup>

The primary criticism of UA in the subsequent literature has been that Driver's analysis "is inconsistent with some important ethical beliefs which we hold to be true."<sup>17</sup> First, to suppose that a dogmatic disposition toward ignorance concerning one's true worth is productive of virtue in any sense is counterintuitive. We believe ignorance and self-deception to be moral defects; to imagine that there is class of virtues that *requires* such states is paradoxical, to say the least. Second, UA makes it impossible for a person to be deliberately modest, since ignorance is a necessary condition for modesty. This would make it impossible to cultivate or even to desire to cultivate modesty, since "surely one cannot consciously form false beliefs about oneself."<sup>18</sup> Finally, it very well may be that such a disposition toward ignorance concerning self-worth would be productive of far more undesirable than desirable states of affairs, situations in which the modest or humble person would be disposed toward servility, feelings of inferiority, and general ignorance concerning one's worth as a human being. For all of these reasons, the general consensus in the literature has been that UA is reduced to absurdity by its reliance on ignorance.<sup>19</sup>

The primary alternative secular account of humility, proposed by Owen Flanagan, is the *nonoverestimation account* (NA).<sup>20</sup> According to this formulation, "the modest person may well have a perfectly accurate sense of her accomplishments and worth, but she does not overestimate them."<sup>21</sup> The attraction of this position is that it appears to solve the logical puzzle concerning humility raised previously as well as avoiding the various counterintuitive implications of UA. While Driver's modest person believes she is truthful in her estimation of her own worth but is actually ignorant of the

real truth, the modest or humble person according to NA both knows the truth and incorporates it accurately into her self-evaluation, since according to this account “there is no need for the modest person to be ignorant of her worth and accomplishments . . . modesty and realism in self-appraisal are perfectly compatible.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, NA does not require that modesty or humility be involuntary. While Driver’s modest person cannot consciously strive to be modest, Flanagan’s can.

The voluntary nature of modesty according to NA reveals some important underlying features of this account. Although there may be persons who systematically underestimate their value in the sense required by UA, Flanagan argues that such persons are anomalous. The far greater problem in the context of self-evaluation is to *overestimate* one’s value. Hence, NA modesty requires simply that one “learn not to overestimate one’s accomplishment and worth,” since most of us are “immodest overestimators.”<sup>23</sup> These considerations provide support for our intuitions that “what we need is not more people who underestimate their self-worth [UA], but more people who do not overestimate their worth and accomplishments [NA].”<sup>24</sup> Although subsequent writers find fault with various aspects of NA, Hare clearly has it in mind when he summarizes recent work on modesty and humility as “promising new attempts to give a more positive and central role to humility as a secular virtue . . . as a quality of making accurate self-assessments, often with special emphasis on non-*overestimation* (as opposed to underestimation) of one’s merits.”<sup>25</sup>

Although NA is an improvement on UA for the above reasons, both accounts share the fundamental assumption that modesty/humility is to be understood, oddly enough, as primarily self-referential. For reasons I discuss below, this assumption arises from a deep commitment to a naturalistic metaphysics that excludes by definition anything transcendent; hence, the insistence that humility must be a “secular” virtue if it is to be a virtue at all. This commitment causes all virtues, even those such as humility whose core energy is largely directed *away* from the self, to be essentially centered *on* the self. A brief consideration of problems that have been raised concerning NA will shed light on these larger problems that arise from the attempt to define humility in naturalistic terms.

According to Flanagan, “the modest person sees more clearly than most how the base rates work.”<sup>26</sup> What, however, are the “base rates,” and on what basis does Flanagan assume that these “rates” locate an individual’s value at a lower point than the non-modest individual generally does? Flanagan does not directly answer this question, but, as will be shown below, the critical analysis of other commentators suggests that in order for NA to work, the “base rates” must first be egalitarian and, second, must locate human worth as relatively low in the overall scheme of things. NA, in other words, must be supplemented with at least two additional principles, both of which turn out to be problematic within a naturalistic framework.

First, Ben-Ze’ev argues that NA must be supplemented by some sort of egalitarian evaluative principle. Without a supplemental principle that establishes “the fundamental similar worth of all human beings,” “we may estimate our worth accurately but still be immodest in the sense that we con-

sider other people inferior to us."<sup>27</sup> all the time being modest according to NA. This, of course, requires that some argument be provided for why the "base rates" must be egalitarian. Most of the authors under consideration indicate that they are, but do not agree on the justification of why they are.<sup>28</sup>

The second problem with NA arises upon further investigation of the NA claim that a person of truly worthy character and accomplishments can still be modest or humble because she will keep her accomplishments "in perspective." "In perspective," as understood by Flanagan, means to resist the temptation to overestimate one's value, the temptation to locate the "base rates" mentioned earlier at a higher level than one should. Daniel Statman observes, however, that this only makes sense if one assumes that human value is, comparatively speaking, pretty low.<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, the person of truly worthy accomplishments, accurately assessing her value according to NA, would still present herself as superior to others, contradicting the general conception of humility. Schueler suggests that the advocate of NA must "implicitly add an assumption to the effect that an accurate view of one's accomplishments, skills, merits, or whatever, will always reveal a relatively low opinion to be the correct one . . . The most obvious problem is that this assumption might just be false for some people and some accomplishments."<sup>30</sup>

If it is truly the case that human value is comparatively low, then it is understandable how accurate self-assessment can lead to humility. How, though, might such an assumption be justified? Both Statman and Schueler point out that a low-value assessment of human worth is entirely consistent with the Jewish and Christian religious traditions.<sup>31</sup> If one is willing to accept a "pessimistic" view of human nature, then NA makes a great deal of sense. The problem is that if NA only makes sense as part of a "religious" framework, NA no longer is a "secular" account of modesty and humility. The framework needed in order for NA to make sense is precisely the framework that must be rejected in any attempt to give a naturalistic account of humility.<sup>32</sup>

The problems raised with NA, then, are that (1) some principle of fundamental human equality must be added and justified in order for the "base rates" to be accurate, and that (2) NA implicitly assumes that human value is comparatively low, an assumption that can only be justified from a "Christian" or "religious" standpoint that is no longer relevant and is out of place in an attempt to give a "secular" account of modesty and humility. Problem (1) concerns the comparison of individuals with each other, while (2) addresses the overall collective value of human beings in the larger scheme of things. In the sections that follow, I use the work of Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil to address these problems in reverse order, arguing that neither problem can be solved satisfactorily on a naturalistic basis. True humility must be understood within a context that includes the transcendent; only within this context can the analysis of humility escape the naturalistic, self-referential limitations that characterize the recent literature.

## II.

*Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement . . . It is a selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of virtues.*

*Iris Murdoch*<sup>33</sup>

The recent philosophical literature has attempted to “secularize” humility by defining it in terms of accurate self-assessment, with an emphasis on resisting the overestimation of one’s worth. As shown in the previous section, however, this definition arguably requires additional supporting assumptions that violate the naturalistic framework within which the secularizing is going on. Schlesinger suggests that these problems arise because of a fundamental error concerning the nature of humility.

I believe that the assertion of any false or true statements about one’s worth and accomplishments, or the harboring of correct or incorrect beliefs about them, plays no substantial role in determining the degree of humility an individual may exemplify. Instead, humility is a function of the attitudes a person has toward certain facts and of the significance he attaches to them. It has to do with what an individual’s attention is focused upon.<sup>34</sup>

I agree that “secular” humility is not humility at all, because naturalized humility is focused first and foremost on the self. Rather, humility is directed *away* from oneself and is a virtue that arises from a recognition of and attunement to a reality that is other and greater than oneself. In this section, I argue that such a virtue cannot be accounted for on exclusively naturalistic assumptions and suggest ways in which transcendence might be reintroduced into the discussion of humility without immediately adopting the “religious” framework that contemporary work in humility is so critical of.

Much of Iris Murdoch’s later philosophical work focuses on the crisis arising from the decline of religion and the increasing influence of the naturalistic framework that lies at the core of contemporary science. Although she is not a religious (Christian or otherwise) thinker in the traditional sense, she insists that the apparent decline of traditional religious constructs must not blind us to the necessity of preserving the morally crucial features of transcendence and “otherness” that are definitive of these frameworks.<sup>35</sup> In “Against Dryness,” she writes that “We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with. We need to be enabled . . . to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality.”<sup>36</sup> Thus enabled, Murdoch’s moral hero is the “mystical hero” who

is the man who has given up traditional religion but is still haunted by a sense of the reality and unity of some sort of spiritual world. . . . The virtue of the mystical hero is humility . . . [the mystical hero] is the new version of the man of faith, believing in goodness without religious guarantees, guilty, muddled, yet not without hope. This image consoles by showing us man as frail, godless, and yet possessed of genuine intuitions of an authoritative good.<sup>37</sup>

Murdoch specifies humility as the primary virtue of the mystical hero because, contrary to recent characterizations of humility, she identifies humility as the virtue most characteristic of the person who resists the ten-

dency to believe that she is “the measure of all things” and turns her energy and concern outward. Murdoch describes such a person in the final lines of *The Sovereignty of Good*.

Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self . . . Names of virtues suggest directions of thought, and this direction seems to me a better one than that suggested by more popular concepts such as freedom and courage. The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are.<sup>38</sup>

Although Murdoch does suggest that “ultimately we are nothing” and that an awareness of this brings us “closer to the deep mystery of being human,”<sup>39</sup> she does not introduce this at the outset as a dogmatic formula. Rather, her characterization of humility begins at a point similar to Flanagan’s when he observes that human beings tend by nature to value themselves more highly than they should.

Murdoch observes that we are fully convinced that we are “the measure of all things;”<sup>40</sup> this delusion blinds us to the fact that consideration of our own experience and the world around us with even the slightest amount of care reveals something entirely different. “We are *continually* confronting something other than ourselves . . . We all, not only can but *have to*, experience and deal with a transcendent reality, the resistant otherness of other persons, other things, history, the natural world, the cosmos, and this involves perpetual effort.”<sup>41</sup> To use a phrase and concept that Murdoch borrows from Simone Weil, this effort requires the turning of one’s *attention* away from what we most naturally attend to, ourselves.<sup>42</sup> “The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world.”<sup>43</sup> Arguably, the attempts to define humility in secular terms discussed in the first section fail to require this redirection of the attention.

Our human tendency to place ourselves at the center of reality is not ultimately replaced in Murdoch’s analysis by a cognitive and evaluative activity simply directed toward others rather than oneself. Humility requires a transformation of orientation that is far more attitudinal than cognitive. Weil speaks of “an orientation of the soul towards something which one does not know, but whose reality one does know . . . I turn my attention towards this thing about which I know simply that it *is*, but about which I haven’t the least idea *what* it is.”<sup>44</sup> What is transcendent, what is other, is always in some sense beyond us; this is why “it is a *task* to come to see the world as it is”<sup>45</sup> and why it is much more natural to remain primarily focused on oneself.

It is one thing to say that human beings are not “the measure of all things;” it is another thing, however, to claim that human beings do not count for much in the ultimate scheme of things. One of the primary criticisms of NA, specified in Part I, was that NA implicitly requires the belief that overall human value is low, a belief that makes it impossible for per-



sons of true accomplishments and value to be humble. The criticism further suggests that this belief is most appropriate in the context of a traditionally religious perspective such as Judaism or Christianity. As noted above, Murdoch claims that we "ultimately are nothing," and Weil's seemingly low opinion of at least her own value runs throughout her notebooks and published writings. Apart from the "religious" framework that contemporary investigators of humility reject, what reason is there to believe this?

Although one need not adopt the limited and pessimistic framework described by Richards at the beginning of this essay in order to conclude that human value is comparatively low in the ultimate scheme of things, such a conclusion does require a metaphysical framework within which the gap between the contingency of human existence and the absolute nature of values such as truth and goodness can be recognized. Humility in Murdoch's sense requires a turning of one's attention outward. Although this movement of the attention is most often toward other contingent things, such as other persons, works of art, or the beauty of the world, such a movement is ultimately energized by the natural human longing for what is not merely contingent.<sup>46</sup> If we "pay attention," we experience fully the attraction of what is most important but is most unlike us.

The supreme principle or absolute, the certain unfailing pure source and perfect object of love is not and cannot be an existing thing (or person) and is separate from, though magnetically connected with contingent "stuff" however thought of in some contexts as fundamental.<sup>47</sup>

Persons who seek the truth about themselves are "magnetized by an independent transcendent multiform reality,"<sup>48</sup> a reality of which they are only a small, contingent part. An important element of true humility is the awareness of the "fragility" and contingency of all aspects of the human being.

There is nothing that cannot be broken or taken from us. Ultimately we are nothing. A reminder of our mortality, a recognition of contingency, must at least make us humble. Are we not then closer to the deep mystery of being human? . . . Of course one's persona or self-protective personality or "life illusion" is part of one's working gear as a human being; yet, as we are occasionally given to perceive, it is extremely fragile. Anyone can be destroyed.<sup>49</sup>

The assumptions underlying this perspective need not be "religious" in the traditional sense, but they are at significant odds with the naturalistic metaphysics within which contemporary analyses of humility are situated. One of my themes to this point has been that these contemporary discussions cannot accommodate humility as "the root of all authentic virtues"<sup>50</sup> because humility cannot be properly understood as a "secular" virtue, if "secular" requires the elimination of the transcendent. Humility requires a fundamental awareness of the transcendence of reality, a transcendence within which in some strange way contingent creatures such as ourselves "live and move and have our being."

There's no secret knowledge, no complete explanation, we must be humble and simple and see what we know and respect what we don't know. Man is not the measure of all things, we don't just invent our values, we live by a higher law, yet we can't fully explain how this is so.<sup>51</sup>

### III.

*Humility of a really high order is something unknown to us. We cannot even conceive such a thing possible.*  
— Simone Weil<sup>52</sup>

One of the primary problems raised with the NA account of humility is that it implicitly assumes that human value is low, an assumption requiring placement within a "Christian" or "religious" metaphysical framework that is no longer relevant and is contrary to any attempt to provide a "secular" account of modesty and humility. In the previous section, I used the work of Iris Murdoch to argue that such a belief concerning human value can be reached without assumptions that would be characterized as traditionally "religious," but that a meaningful conception of humility does require a metaphysical framework including the transcendent, a framework that leads precisely to the assumption concerning overall human value that contemporary investigators of humility are most wary of. In this final section, I consider another problem raised with NA, that it requires a supplemental principle of human equality. Any meaningful account of humility does indeed require belief in such a principle, but the principle is difficult to establish on a naturalistic basis. I use the work of Simone Weil to show that such a principle can only be fully justified in the context of precisely that "transcendent" framework that secular accounts of humility seek to avoid.<sup>53</sup>

Human beings not only tend to overrate their collective value in comparison to other existing things, but also regularly rank themselves individually as superior in value to their fellow human beings. Since "the basic evaluative belief involved in modesty concerns the fundamental similar worth of all human beings,"<sup>54</sup> any account of modesty or humility must show why all persons should be considered as equal in worth, despite the natural human tendency to rate oneself higher than others. Indeed, one of the primary texts concerning humility in the Gospels indicates that it is precisely the refusal to rank oneself in comparison to others that is at the heart of true humility. In response to the disciples' question "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?", Jesus draws their attention to a little child and says "unless you become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>55</sup> How, then, is one to become "as little children" and resist the natural tendency to care about one's rank in comparison with others?

In her *Notebooks*, Simone Weil provides a practical discussion of how this might occur. She begins by observing "Humility; believing oneself to be beneath others. This in itself does not make any sense."<sup>56</sup> Why should humility require that one believe oneself to be *beneath* others, rather than

simply requiring that one not believe oneself to be *above* others? Weil explains that she defines humility in this way in order to bring about an evaluative equilibrium.

One must believe oneself to be beneath others in order to bring oneself round to the point where one regards oneself as their equal and does not prefer oneself. Since it is impossible to prevent oneself from imagining a hierarchical order, a ladder amongst human beings, one must place oneself on the lowest rung so as to avoid being situated above any other human being in one's own estimation. By dint of maintaining oneself on the lowest rung, the ladder disappears.<sup>57</sup>

Just as Descartes proposed to *deny* what he believed to be true in order to bring himself to the point that he could *doubt* it, Weil suggests that humility can be fostered if one believes oneself to be *beneath* others in order to come to the place that one no longer considers oneself *above* others. This, of course, can also facilitate the turning of the attention away from oneself that is fundamental to humility, as considered in the previous section.

This, however, does not explain why one *should* consider all human beings as fundamentally equal. What of those who are truly superior to others? On what basis and for what reasons should they refuse to acknowledge their superiority and treat their inferiors as equals? As noted earlier, although contemporary writers on humility generally agree that some sort of principle of human equality is needed, they disagree concerning the basis for and justification of this principle. Weil addresses this problem in her essay "Are We Struggling for Justice?", arguing that "it is not doctrines, conceptions, inclinations, intentions, wants, which thus transform the mechanism of human thought. For this madness is needed."<sup>58</sup>

Weil begins this essay by drawing our attention to Thucydides' famous story of the Athenians and the Melians during the Peloponnesian War.<sup>59</sup> The Athenians scoff at the Melians' call for fair play and equal treatment, because the Athenians are entirely in a position of power. Equal consideration and treatment is only required between equals: "The examination of what is just is carried out only when there is equal necessity on each side. Where there is one who is strong and one who is weak, the possible is done by the first and accepted by the second."<sup>60</sup> According to the Athenians, there is no reason that they should treat the Melians fairly, because "by a necessity of nature each one always commands wherever he has the power to do so."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, it is unreasonable to dictate *a priori* that all humans are of equal value, as humility requires. If a person is truly superior in value or worth to others, then just as the Athenians would have been foolish to treat the Melians as equals when they obviously were not, it would be foolish for the superior person to pretend that she is equal to her inferiors.

The story is familiar; what is of interest for present purposes is Weil's conclusion that, on an exclusively human level, the Athenians are absolutely correct. As she writes elsewhere, "It is impossible to feel equal respect for things that are in fact unequal unless the respect is given to something that is identical in all of them. Men are unequal in all their relations with

the things of this world, without exception."<sup>62</sup> There is, in other words, no "secular" or "naturalistic" basis upon which true human equality can be established. Common possession of reason and shared human experience are insufficient to establish the needed principle, nor can it simply be assumed axiomatically.

The Melian appeal to the self-interest of the Athenians was unsuccessful; how else might the Melians have tried to convince the Athenians to treat unequals equally? Weil anachronistically provides them with an argument from the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation: "Being in the state of God, He did not regard equality with God as a prize . . . . He assumed the state of slavery . . . . He humbled himself to the point of being made obedient unto death . . . . Even though He was the Son, what he suffered taught Him obedience."<sup>63</sup> Here is an example of what is truly of most value, the Divine itself, choosing voluntarily to become equal to, even lower than, those that are truly lower than itself. Weil observes, however, that such an argument would hardly have been convincing to the Athenians. "These words could have been an answer to the Athenian murderers of Melos. They would have really made them laugh. And rightly so. They are absurd. They are mad."<sup>64</sup>

For Weil, humility is "the only entirely supernatural virtue"<sup>65</sup> because it looks beyond the "natural" in seeking to lay the only possible foundation for justice and human equality. What could cause a person to treat another person as an equal, when there is no "earthly" reason to do so? One must seek for something in the other person that transcends the various contingencies that establish hierarchies and inequality. Weil, writing toward the end of World War II, observes that "mankind has become mad from want of love."<sup>66</sup> Such madness can be addressed only by another sort of madness, a love that "once it has seized a human being, completely transforms the modalities of action and thought."<sup>67</sup> Such love, as any love, requires an object.

One needs above all something to love . . . not through hating its opposite, but in itself . . . . Something to love not for its glory, its prestige, its glitter, its conquests, its radiance, its future prospects, but for itself . . . . What we need is something people can love naturally from the depths of their hearts.<sup>68</sup>

In "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations," Weil describes the metaphysical framework within which one can locate the true source of human equality.

There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties. Corresponding to this reality, at the center of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world. Just as the reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts, so that other reality is the sole foundation of the good. That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world:

that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligations. Those minds whose attention and love are turned towards that reality are the sole intermediary through which good can descend from there and come among men. Although it is beyond the reach of any human faculties, man has the power of turning his attention and love towards it.<sup>69</sup>

Weil is here describing within a detailed metaphysical context the same dynamic described by Murdoch when she writes that “we yearn for the transcendent, for God, for something divine and good and pure,”<sup>70</sup> even though we do not know with any specificity what this other reality is.<sup>71</sup> The task of the humble person is to turn his or her attention toward this reality, with the conviction that such attention will not go unrewarded. “To anyone who does actually consent to directing his attention and love beyond the world, towards the reality that exists outside the reach of all human faculties, it is given to succeed in doing so.”<sup>72</sup>

Weil locates the true basis of human equality in the human capacity to seek for and believe in the efficacy of what is greater than oneself.

The combination of these two facts—the longing in the depth of the heart for absolute good, and the power, though only latent, of directing attention and love to a reality beyond the world and of receiving good from it—constitutes a link which attaches every man without exception to that other reality. Whoever recognizes that reality recognizes also that link. Because of it, he holds every human being without any exception as something sacred to which he is bound to show respect. This is the only possible motive for universal respect towards all human beings.<sup>73</sup>

The object of the love required to establish the equality of all persons despite their contingent differences is precisely this capacity, equal in all persons, to attend to what transcends contingency.

The only thing that is identical in all men is the presence of a link with the reality outside the world. All human beings are absolutely identical insofar as they can be thought of as consisting of a center, which is an unquenchable desire for good, surrounded by an accretion of physical and bodily matter.<sup>74</sup>

This is why Weil reminds herself in her *Notebooks* “to accord value in myself only to what is transcendent;”<sup>75</sup> only in the context of what is transcendent can the natural human tendency to value oneself more highly than others be countered by attention to what is truly of value in all persons.<sup>76</sup> This, in turn, makes justice and equality, the natural fruits of humility, possible.

Anyone whose attention and love are really directed towards the reality outside the world recognizes at the same time that he is bound, both in public and private life, by the single and permanent

obligation to remedy, according to his responsibilities and to the extent of his power, all the privations of soul and body which are liable to destroy or damage the earthly life of any human being whatsoever.<sup>77</sup>

Humility as described by Murdoch and Weil does not necessarily carry the additional characteristics of the "religious" frameworks that are of so much concern in contemporary discussions of humility. Their conceptions of humility, however, provide evidence that humility cannot be properly accounted for without a metaphysical framework that transcends naturalism, a framework whose details can be specified in a variety of ways. This is but one illustration of moral growth as "a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me," in which "attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality."<sup>78</sup>

Life is a spiritual pilgrimage inspired by the disturbing magnetism of *truth*, involving *ipso facto* a purification of energy and desire in the light of a vision of what is *good*. The good and just life is thus a process of clarification, a movement toward selfless lucidity, guided by ideas of perfection which are objects of *love*.<sup>79</sup>

Providence College

#### NOTES

1. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 103-104.
2. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 104.
3. Norvin Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 25 (1988), 253-59; Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), 373-84; Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), 420-28; Daniel Statman, "Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992), 420-38; Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, "The Virtue of Modesty," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), 235-45; Stephen Hare, "The Paradox of Moral Humility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1996), 235-41; G. F. Schueler, "Why Modesty Is a Virtue," *Ethics* 107 (1997), 467-85; Julia Driver, "Modesty and Ignorance," *Ethics* 109 (1999), 827-34; G. F. Schueler, "Why IS Modesty a Virtue?" *Ethics* 109 (1999), 835-41.
4. Hare, 235.
5. Norvin Richards, "Humility," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (New York: Garland, 1992), vol. 1, 578. Richards refers to this metaphysical framework as "Roman Catholic," but it is referred to by other recent authors as "Christian" or simply "religious." In no way, of course, does this passage exhaustively describe all possible frameworks that might be regarded as authentically "Christian."
6. Schueler (1997), 484.
7. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 95.
8. George N. Schlesinger, "Truth, Humility and Philosophers," in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 254.

9. Hare, 235.

10. Driver (1989), 374. The authors under consideration do not always agree on the appropriate term to describe the character trait they are analyzing. Driver, Flanagan, Ben-Ze'ev and Schueler prefer to speak of "modesty," although only Ben-Ze'ev attempts to clearly distinguish between modesty and humility, saying that "the crucial difference is that modest people do not overrate themselves, whereas humble people underrate themselves" (Ben-Ze'ev, 240). Richards speaks exclusively of humility, while Statman and Hare use "modesty" and "humility" interchangeably. My primary focus in this paper is on humility, which I take to be entirely different in structure than either modesty or humility as discussed in the recent literature.

11. Driver (1989), 374.

12. *Ibid.*, 378.

13. Driver (1999), 828. This suggests an important connection between humility and the refusal to evaluate persons within a hierarchical structure. I will argue that this connection is one which secular evaluations of humility have difficulty justifying.

14. For instance, modesty might promote "an easing of jealousy, envy, and tension between people" [Driver (1989), 383].

15. Driver (1999), 834.

16. Driver (1989), 380.

17. Statman, 423. Flanagan, Statman, Ben-Ze'ev and Schueler all provide arguments against the *underestimation account* along the lines provided below.

18. Statman, 423.

19. Flanagan, 426.

20. Flanagan gives this name to his position in "Virtue and Ignorance" developed in critique of and response to Driver's 1989 article. Richards' 1988 article, "Is Humility a Virtue?", takes a position similar to Flanagan's, even though the Richards article precedes Driver's.

21. Flanagan, 424. Richards similarly argues that "humility . . . involves having an accurate sense of oneself, sufficiently firm to resist pressures toward incorrect revisions" (Richards, 254).

22. Flanagan, 427.

23. *Ibid.*, 426, 427.

24. *Ibid.*, 427.

25. Hare, 235.

26. Flanagan, 427.

27. Ben-Ze'ev, 237. Flanagan might respond that as long as a person does not overestimate her value, she can be both humble and cognizant of her superiority to some other person or persons at the same time. This counterintuitive image of a compatibility between humility and superiority, however, seems closer to condescension than a virtue.

28. Ben-Ze'ev bases the principle "on a belief in the common nature and fate of human beings and on a belief that this commonality dwarfs other differences" (Ben-Ze'ev, 237); Statman looks to the Kantian principle of the "ultimate equality of human beings as 'ends in themselves'" (Statman, 434); Schueler suggests that if we could trace the causes of human praiseworthy actions far enough back, we would find that "none of the essential explanatory factors would be things for which one could fairly claim any credit" [Schueler (1997), 484], thus deterministically reducing all human beings to the same level; Richards (and perhaps Flanagan) seems to assume equality as a fundamental axiom. In the third section of this paper, I investigate Simone Weil's pessimism concerning the possibility of establishing human equality on an exclusively naturalistic basis, a pessimism that I largely share.

29. Statman, 429-32.
30. Schueler (1997), 473.
31. Statman and Schueler assume that these traditions necessarily demand a "pessimistic" view of human nature, such as that described in the Richards passage on page 1.
32. "The central concepts of modern ethics have their origin in a religious tradition which is no longer held by most modern societies. . . . It should not surprise us that concepts which were so intimately connected with religious beliefs cannot be accounted for in any reasonable way, once these beliefs are ignored or rejected. Often such concepts should simply be jettisoned" (Statman, 432).
33. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 95.
34. Schlesinger, 252.
35. "Nietzsche's 'God is dead' seems to announce the end of moral as well as religious absolutes. But we continue to recognize moral absolutes . . . Kant was right to take our recognition of duty as something fundamental. We manage it . . . We can lose God, but not Good" (Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 473).
36. Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 293. It is debatable whether Murdoch's project of preserving a meaningful sense of transcendence while rejecting traditional metaphysics and religion can ultimately be successful. Still, it is important, for the purposes of this paper, to take seriously her distinction between "transcendent" and "religious," since this is a distinction that those seeking to "secularize" humility consistently fail to appreciate.
37. Murdoch, "Existentialists and Mystics," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 227.
38. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 103-104.
39. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 501.
40. "We live in a dream, we're wrapped up in a dark veil, we think we're omnipotent magicians, we don't believe anything exists except ourselves" (Murdoch, "Above the Gods," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 515).
41. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 268.
42. "Moral change comes from an attention to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of the reality of, primarily of course other people, but also other things" (Ibid., 52). Although there are many important differences between Murdoch and Weil (some of which will be noted in the final section of this paper), Murdoch's is deeply indebted to Weil in her discussion of humility and other related issues, a debt that Murdoch frequently acknowledges. See, for instance, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 50.
43. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 66.
44. Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, 2 vols., trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 333-34. Murdoch quotes this passage in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 401.
45. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 91. Earlier, she writes that "By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world," 84.
46. "We yearn for the transcendent, for God, for something divine and good and pure, but in picturing the transcendent we transform it into idols which we then realize to be contingent particulars, just things among others here below" (Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 56).
47. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 479.



48. *Ibid.*, 301.
49. *Ibid.*, 501. Murdoch develops this discussion in some detail within the context of Weil's important notions of "affliction" (*malheur*) and "gravity" (*pesanteur*).
50. Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 210.
51. Murdoch, "Above the Gods," 525.
52. Simone Weil, *The Need For Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 135.
53. As the following discussion shows, one significant difference between Weil and Murdoch on the issue of transcendence is that Weil is much more willing to flesh out the transcendent framework within which humility must fit than Murdoch is. Both, however, are equally committed to the inadequacies of naturalism.
54. Ben-Ze'ev, 237.
55. Matthew 18:1-4. The story is also reported in Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-50.
56. Weil, *Notebooks*, 239.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Simone Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?," in *Simone Weil*, ed. Eric O. Springsted (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 124.
59. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1974), 400-408.
60. Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?," 120. This passage is Weil's own translation of Thucydides.
61. *Ibid.*, 122.
62. Simone Weil, "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations," in *Selected Essays, 1934-43*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 220.
63. Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?," 123. This passage is Weil's own translation of Philippians 2:6-9.
64. *Ibid.*, 123.
65. Weil, *Notebooks*, 275.
66. Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?," 130.
67. *Ibid.*, 123.
68. *Ibid.*, 128.
69. Weil, "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations," 219.
70. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 56.
71. Clearly, however, Weil is venturing a great deal further in specifying the nature of this dynamic than Murdoch does.
72. Weil, "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations," 220.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. Weil, *Notebooks*, 274.
76. "Only by really directing the attention beyond the world can there be real contact with this central and essential fact of human nature. Only an attention thus directed possesses the faculty, always identical in all cases, of irradiating with light any human being whatsoever" (Weil, "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations," 221).
77. Weil, "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations," 221-22.
78. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.
79. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 14.