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"Glad Intellectual Dependence on God:  
A Theistic Account of Intellectual Humility"

by Peter C. Hill, Kent Dunnington and  
M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall

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# Glad Intellectual Dependence on God: A Theistic Account of Intellectual Humility

*Peter C. Hill*

*Kent Dunnington*

*M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall*

*Biola University*

We present a view of intellectual humility as it may be experienced and expressed by a theist. From a religious cultural perspective and drawing primarily on Augustine, we argue that intellectual humility for the theist is based on glad intellectual dependence on God. It is evidenced in five markers of IH: (a) proper unconcern about one's intellectual status and entitlements; (b) proper concern about one's intellectual failures and limitations; (c) proper posture of intellectual submission to divine teaching; (d) order epistemic attitudes that properly reflect one's justification for one's views, including those views held on the basis of religious testimony, church authority, interpretations of scripture, and the like; and (e) proper view of the divine orientation of inquiry. Implications of this perspective for the study of intellectual humility are provided.

Positive psychology's critique that the study of what is "right" about people has been understudied has opened the door to investigate the psychological study of virtue. Sandage and Hill (2001; also see Hill & Sandage, 2016, for an update) suggested that virtue is not only relevant to psychological study, but that it can provide a guiding framework for a science of positive psychology by suggesting that virtues (a) promote human flourishing and positive health, (b) cultivate human strength and resilience, and (c) promote positive characteristics not only in the individual but also in community. This new attention to the study of virtue has included the psychological study of intellectual virtues. Of the intellectual virtues, one that seems

especially relevant in an age where people frequently ignore, belittle, or even aggressively attack alternative ideas, beliefs, or perspectives, is intellectual humility. Philosophers have provided a number of accounts of intellectual humility (IH), some of which also apply well to understanding humility as a general motivational construct.

The purpose of this paper is to apply these accounts of IH in light of how people may actually comprehend and apply humility, intellectual or otherwise, in their lives. In so doing, we consider how IH is understood from a theistic worldview perspective. Our approach in this paper is four-pronged. First, we review contemporary philosophical accounts of IH. Second, we consider IH within the context of a cultural perspective. Third, we apply a religious cultural perspective, particularly an Augustinian theistic account, to the study of IH. Fourth, we explore how this religious cultural perspective might influence the study of IH.

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Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Peter C. Hill, Ph.D., Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Ave., La Mirada, CA 90639; peter.hill@biola.edu

## **Three Leading Philosophical Accounts of IH**

In recent decades, philosophers have recovered an interest in the virtues, including the virtue of intellectual humility (e.g., Zagzebski, 1996). The three accounts of IH that seem to be receiving the most attention are the following.

### **Low Concern for Status or Self-Importance (Roberts & Wood, 2007)**

IH is the opposite of intellectual arrogance or improper pride and therefore consists of a

disposition to an unusually low concern for one's intellectual status and entitlements. The intellectually humble person is less interested in being recognized for his or her intellectual accomplishments than in promoting the subject matter itself. This approach stresses the *lack of vices of pride* that, in themselves, take on a socially comparative importance.

**Limitations Owning (Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, & Howard-Snyder, 2015)**

IH consists of a disposition of having the right stance toward one's intellectual limitations while proper pride is having the right stance toward one's intellectual strengths. This involves proper attentiveness to—and owning of—one's limitations for which the humble person will try to responsibly compensate.

**Proper Beliefs (Church & Samuelson, 2017; Hazlett, 2012)**

Also sometimes referred to as the *doxastic mean* account, IH is a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic status of one's beliefs in that it consists in finding the mean between over-estimating and under-estimating the positive epistemic status of one's beliefs. The intellectually humble person is the one who tends to have an accurate sense of the varying levels of epistemic strength that characterize his or her own views; this person is accurate about which ones amount to knowledge, which ones are well-established beliefs, etc., all the way down to which ones are mere assumptions or working hypotheses.

There are other philosophical accounts (e.g., an *Accurate Estimation of Strengths* account [Flanagan, 1990; Richards, 1988]; an *Overestimation of Weaknesses* account [Driver, 1989]), but these three accounts are the most pertinent for the purpose of this paper. Regardless, all of the accounts are unitive in nature in that they try to ascertain IH's essential core—that is, the conditions which are constitutive of what it means to be intellectually humble. By focusing on the two accounts that have received the most attention by philosophers (the low concern for status account and the limitations owning account), Dunnington (2017) has argued through counterexamples that neither account is foolproof and thus the search for a unified account of IH is likely untenable. Rather, Dunnington recommends that we consider these characteristics as *markers* or *indicators* of IH.

If Dunnington is correct and insistence on uncovering a unitary account is misguided, it does not mean that psychologists will find these intense philosophical efforts useless. There is considerable value for the psychologist studying IH, or perhaps any other virtue (intellectual or otherwise), to be well-grounded in the philosophical literature that often provides a number of coherent structures from which to understand the construct of interest.

However, though each of these views of humility have merit, our approach as psychologists is to follow Dunnington's (2017) advice and consider each of these accounts as markers or indicators of humility. Thus, psychologists are well-advised to ground their research in, for example, a limitations owning humility, a low concern for status humility, a proper belief humility, an accurate estimate of strengths humility, or potential others. In fact, it may be the case that all of these accounts, plus more that are yet to be developed, when taken together are what will best propel the empirical study of humility, intellectual or otherwise.

**A Cultural Perspective on IH**

One key element not emphasized in the contemporary philosophical literature on intellectual humility is its cultural variety. Positive psychology's assumption of being an objective science that can “transcend particular cultures and politics and approach universality” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5) has been increasingly questioned by evidence that virtues are most fully understood in the context of cultural particularity (Cook, Sandage, Hill, & Strawn, 2009; Sandage & Naicker, 2009).

The failure to acknowledge the dependence of virtues on specific traditions has led, according to philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), to the unintentional prioritizing of contemporary moral and political assumptions about the world, however inadequate or confused they may be. This is certainly the case in psychology, where the renewed interest in the virtues due to the popularity of positive psychology has led to the widespread attempt to define virtues in ways that are independent of specific traditions, resulting in thin, lowest-common-denominator views of these virtues. This move in psychology has not been without its detractors. For example, Hill and Hall (2018) have argued that this presumed neutrality

regarding the virtues may hide assumptions such as the universality of virtues, human autonomy, the superiority of objective quantitative methods, and moral relativism.

With regard to IH, Paine and colleagues (Paine, Moon, Hauge, & Sandage, 2018) point out that:

Subjective and formal definitions of the good promote a humility rooted in positive emotions and generally valued patterns, without articulating the ends to which humility ought to be directed (i.e., before what should we humble ourselves?). Also, the process by which positive psychologists identify and define virtues may ultimately marginalize or discard aspects of humility emphasized by certain cultures (e.g., surrender, self-emptying, social activism, or connections to nature), indirectly excluding some communities from knowledge production. (p. 285)

Culture takes on many forms, and cultural variation can be sliced in a number of ways. In acknowledging the many definitions and forms of culture, Triandis (2007) suggests that there are three characteristics that most scholars agree upon: culture emerges in adaptive interactions between people and their environments, culture involves shared elements, and culture transcends lengthy time periods, including generations.

Cohen (2009) argues that one especially pertinent form of culture is religion and, in so doing, utilizes the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1973) definition of religion as:

a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (p. 90, as quoted in Cohen, 2009, p. 96)

Though humility is culturally grounded in many of the world's religious traditions, such grounding has been largely disregarded in

contemporary philosophical and empirical study. Religion provides "a set of practices, a web of relationships and beliefs, a grammar of motives, an array of rituals and institutional arrangements" (Dueck & Reimer, 2003, p. 427) within which particular virtues are embedded. In fact, one might argue that theism—and, for Western culture, Christianity especially—is why today we think of humility, including intellectual humility, as a virtue. Pre-Christian ancient Greco-Roman culture had nothing positive to say about humility at all. The "humble" people—the *humiliores*—were just the lowly, the poor, the massive underclass of society who were of no interest to those who mattered, the few well-bred elites whose privilege allowed them to aspire to virtue and excellence. The Christian tradition, on the other hand, affirmed that humility is a virtue, perhaps a preeminent Christian virtue, by placing humility at the center of the moral life in an unprecedented way. Jesus apparently thought of humility as the best measure of a person's spiritual maturity. "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven," he taught (Matthew 18:4). Philippians 2 identifies humility as the defining characteristic of the incarnate Christ and one that his followers should seek to imitate.

### A Theistic Perspective on IH

Thus, we propose that an accounting of IH is incomplete if a religious perspective is ignored. There are a number of reasons why we recommend that a religious perspective must be included. First, it is an approach that has not received much attention by psychologists. Second, as noted above, unlike the ancient Greeks as well as philosophers like Hume and Nietzsche, religious traditions have extolled humility as a virtue (Bollinger & Hill, 2012; Porter et al., 2017). Third, there may be collective wisdom from religious traditions that will benefit a psychological understanding of IH and humility in general. Fourth, there is limited evidence that religious individuals value humility more than non-religious people (Van Tongeren, Davis, Hook, Rowatt, & Worthington, 2017). Fifth, religious people not only see themselves as more humble than non-religious people, but they are also seen by others as being more humble (Rowatt, Kang, Haggard, & LaBouff, 2014). Finally,

religious people may understand and therefore interpret what it means to be humble through a religious lens.

Up front, we want to be clear that we are not proposing a competing view to the understandings presented by philosophers above that is somehow distinctly religious. In fact, the positions articulated above by philosophers have Christian scriptural support, and likely support from other religious traditions as well, and therefore should not be discounted as somehow antithetical to a religious perspective. Consider, for example, the following passage from Paul in the book of Romans which seems clearly in line with the willingness to see oneself accurately, including an awareness of one's limitations but also one's strengths and contribution potential (a combination of positions 2 and 3 outlined above):

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup> For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,<sup>(b)</sup> do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. (Romans 12: 3-8; NIV)

Similarly, Paul's letter to the church in Philippi extols a low concern for status with an other-oriented regard (position 1 presented above)

<sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:3-4; NIV)

Rather, we modestly propose that an IH character trait, such as those just presented with scriptural support, may be differentially experienced and perhaps displayed due to its interconnection with a distinctive theistic orientation or set of beliefs. As a result, a theistic perspective should be included for a thorough accounting of IH.

We will make the case for our proposal by considering specifically an Augustinian account of humility. Perhaps St. Augustine was not exaggerating when he wrote that "almost the whole of Christian teaching is humility" (*de Virginitate* 31). This does not mean that humility is disregarded or ignored in other religious and spiritual traditions. Nor are we asserting that there is a distinctive character trait called "Christian IH." Again, we simply suggest that how humility, including IH, is understood and experienced may be considerably different for, as an example, a Christian theist than for someone with a more secular orientation and, therefore, it will be imperative that empirical approaches take such a distinctive into account.

Augustine's *Confessions* is the seminal account of "intellectual humility" because Augustine's central concern in that book is how his intellectual life changed dramatically when he became a Christian. Augustine's general account of humility as a posture of glad dependence on God (in contrast to a quest for independence) transferred naturally into the domain of his intellectual life (see Dunnington, 2016 for a development of Augustine's account of humility). Although Augustine never used the phrase "intellectual humility," his account of his intellectual life is characterized by what we will call a "glad intellectual dependence on God," for both one's intellectual identity and one's intellectual quest. In other words, we suspect that IH for theists captures several interrelated characteristics of dependence upon God for one's intellectual identity and aspiration.

In this way, the motivations behind humility are distinctly theistic, grounded in a particular kind of relationship of glad dependence on an omniscient, omnipotent, and loving God. Here is where a departure from more generic accounts of intellectual humility might occur. As noted above, the apparent neutrality of contemporary accounts of intellectual humility may mask unacknowledged assumptions. One such

assumption appears to be the Enlightenment ideal of intellectual autonomy which permeates contemporary culture. In his famous article, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), Emmanuel Kant defined Enlightenment as,

man’s leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if its cause is not lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one’s intelligence without being guided by another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own intelligence! (quoted in Jacob, 2001, pp. 202-208)

The emphasis on intellectual autonomy stands in stark contrast to a Christian tradition (as well as other theistic traditions) of prioritizing dependence on God, in ways that we will elucidate below.

In the following sections we explore how a Christian theist might experience the three predominant markers of intellectual humility found in the philosophical literature—low status concern, owning of limitations, and proper beliefs—in distinctive ways.

### **Low Status Concern and Owning of Limitations**

As Dunnington (2017) points out, Augustine highlights two key features in which his new dependence upon God transformed his posture toward his accomplishments and failures in the intellectual domain. These two new insights correspond closely to the first two contemporary views of IH listed above: low concern for status and limitations owning. First, he was freed (gradually) of his obsession over his intellectual status, just as he was freed (gradually) from concerns about his status in general. Second, he was freed (gradually) of his fear of intellectual failure/limitation, just as he was freed (gradually) from fear of limitation/finitude in general. For Augustine, humility changed his fundamental posture toward intellectual success and failure; humility made him less concerned about the former and more concerned to own up to the latter.

Because Augustine’s sense of personal significance was found in his relationship with God, he no longer sought to establish his own worth through the attainment of intellectual superiority or, conversely, the avoidance of intellectual embarrassment. He connects his former concern about these things to his “worldly pride,” and attests how reading Cicero converted him to the discovery that such things were pure vanity. Pride in the intellectual domain, for Augustine, was displayed by an obsession with intellectual status and a corresponding reluctance to admit failure and limitations. Humility in the intellectual domain, conversely, was displayed by a freedom from status-obsession and from the horror of intellectual failure or limitation.

How might these markers of low status concern and limitations-owning differ from non-theistic accounts? In contrast to contemporary accounts of IH where theistic elements are ignored or disregarded, the motivational profile of Augustine’s unconcern about intellectual status is distinctively theistic. Had Augustine been asked why he didn’t care any more about receiving accolades for his rhetorical performances, he would have talked about how such accolades are vanity given that God’s love for him is all that matters for his personal significance. In this way, the low concern for status is directly tied to a particular kind of glad dependence on a loving God. In contemporary accounts, a lack of concern for status appears to be primarily motivated by a greater concern for promoting the subject matter of the intellectual endeavors. While this is not necessarily absent in Christian accounts, it is not the primary motivational force.

Similarly, Augustine agrees that humility in the intellectual domain will make one quick to own up to failure, but whereas the contemporary limitations-owning account thinks the intellectually humble person will be motivated solely by epistemic aspirations (namely, owning up to limitations better positions one with respect to truth), Augustine thinks that limitations-owning is a natural response of one who has grasped his or her complete dependence upon God. Thus, in the contemporary *limitations-owning* account, one owns up to one’s limitations but wishes one did not have them; the attitude toward them may be characterized by regret, sadness, or anger. In contrast, Augustine either embraces limitations as clues

to his finitude or he tries to accept them without regret or sadness because he believes that our ultimate security is not a function of our intellectual prowess.

The concept of finitude merits further elaboration here, as a Christian understanding of finitude is key to differentiating between non-Christian and Christian accounts of limitation-owning. According to the Christian story, humans were created as finite creatures by a loving God to live in loving dependence on God. Human finitude, including the finiteness of human knowledge and power, is part of God's good creation. Consequently, our finitude is something to be embraced as part of our loving dependence on a God who is not finite. It is not something that we should aspire to transcend. In fact, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1943) considered sinful the attempt to overcome our creaturely limits and the unwillingness to accept our finitude in that they constitute attempts to escape our dependent relationship on God. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg (1994) further affirmed the importance of accepting our finitude by pointing to Jesus' example: "Jesus ... accepted his finitude, and with it the finitude of the human creature and of all creaturely existence in relation to God by honoring God as his own Father and Creator, and as the Father and Creator of all creatures" (p. 24). A key distinction between Christian and non-Christian versions of intellectual humility, then, is how intellectual limits are experienced: as part of a created good that can be embraced because it represents our glad dependence on God, or as a negative barrier to be lamented or overcome.

### Proper Beliefs

Theistic commitments also affect what religious adherents consider to be proper beliefs about the epistemic status of their beliefs. For early Christian thinking, divine revelation is not only a *legitimate* epistemic source, it is the *most legitimate* epistemic source. Thus, we do not find Augustine, for example, classifying his theological views as mere opinion or hypothesis. Rather, since they are based on divine teaching, they have an even greater claim to knowledge than the deliverances of the other sciences (see the first few articles of Aquinas's *Summa* for the characteristically early and medieval Christian view of the "science" of doctrine).

We are not arguing here that divine revelation should (or should not) be considered a legitimate epistemic source, but simply note that for many Christians it is, in fact, an important (for some, the most important) epistemic source. As already noted, humility, whether intellectual or otherwise, is a common theme in religious sources of knowledge and may therefore serve as a guiding principle to religiously faithful adherents, just as it was to Augustine. Thus, to study how IH (as well as humility in general) may function in the life of a religious believer, we should take into account the content of the sources of knowledge that are considered legitimate by the people we study.

In light of the high epistemic status of divine revelation for Christians, a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic status of one's beliefs might more specifically be evidenced in two interrelated markers of intellectual humility having generally to do with proper beliefs: 1) a proper posture of intellectual submission to divine teaching and 2) higher order epistemic attitudes that properly reflect one's justification for including those views held on the basis of religious testimony, church authority, interpretations of scripture, and the like.

First, proper inquiry is carried out in submission to God. This means that persons recognize the weight of revelation, whether through direct communication from God (often in prayer), through holy scripture, or through church teaching, and they place themselves in a position of submission to such divine teaching. Here we see how *studiositas* (the Augustinian notion of a proper intellectual appetite, further discussed below) has been self-consciously rejected by post-Enlightenment norms of inquiry, which treat the inquirer as an autonomous intellectual agent whose dependence on any authority beyond him or herself would be a failure of heteronomy.

Second, higher order epistemic attitudes rightly reflect one's justification for one's views, including, in addition to scientific observation and reason, those views held on the basis of religious testimony, church authority, interpretations of scripture, or supposed direct communication from God. Augustine and many other early Christians recognized a distinction between the deliverances of divine revelation (especially scripture) and our *interpretation* of them, and

Augustine cautioned humility with respect to our confidence in our interpretations:

In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture. (*de Genesi ad litteram*, 41)

Here, Augustine points out that personal biases often lead us to overestimate our warrants for the beliefs we hold. Augustine cautions Christians not to confuse their zeal for the Lord with zeal for particular doctrinal positions that are not essential to the faith. We hypothesize that theists who have a high degree of intellectual humility will exhibit a similar sensitivity about the epistemic warrants of their specific beliefs, including their peculiarly religious ones. For instance, we think a theist who is humble will not confuse his or her stance on evolution with “holy teaching,” and will therefore say things like, “I believe in theistic evolution, but I recognize many Christians hold other views and mine are based on limited exposure to the topic and challengeable interpretations of scripture.” Following Hazlett, we don’t think intellectual humility requires that a theist abandon his or her controvertible beliefs, but we do think intellectual humility requires a truthful acknowledgement of such beliefs’ warrants and a lack of fearfulness or defensiveness about their epistemic fragility.

### Proper Goals

To this point, we have argued that a glad intellectual dependence on God will result in different motivations for low status concern, a different posture toward owning of limitations, and differences in what are considered to be proper beliefs about the epistemic status of beliefs. While differing in some ways from existing contemporary accounts of markers of

IH, they also retain many commonalities with these views. We turn now to a marker of humility that appears to be novel in a Christian account of intellectual humility: a proper view of the divine orientation of inquiry.

Augustine thought that a Christian would conduct his inquiries differently than a non-Christian because a Christian would hold that the ultimate goal of inquiry is union with God. Augustine drew a distinction between improper intellectual appetite (*curiositas*) and proper intellectual appetite (*studiositas*). Pride-driven inquiry was *curiositas*, mimicking Adam and Eve’s fatal desire to pursue knowledge in abstraction from dependence upon God. Humble inquiry was *studiositas*, an attempted recovery of the pre-Fall norm of knowing all things in God. As Aquinas put it, the person of *studiositas* is always “referring his knowledge to its due end, namely, the knowledge of God” (ST2-2.167.1).

There are many ways in which *studiositas* directs and constrains intellectual inquiry (see Dunnington, 2018), but in broad-strokes, proper inquiry is oriented to God, which means that any legitimate inquiry will be undertaken with the hope that it will direct a person toward wisdom about God. This means that certain topics take precedence; theology is a genuinely more worthy science than biology, for Augustine. It also means that certain topics are off-limits; Augustine mentions things that are beyond human comprehension (like the day of the Lord’s return) and things that are beneath human dignity (like celebrity gossip) as subjects that a person of *studiositas* will simply ignore. As Alan Jacobs (2001) put it, “Augustine . . . would . . . have added a warning: If attention to God does not *precede* and *envelop* observations of the world, then those observations are simply idolatrous” (p. 21).

The contrast with contemporary accounts of humility are clear. The intellectual autonomy characteristic of post-Enlightenment culture does not recognize the validity of external limitations on the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge is seen as neutral and always worth pursuing. Jacobs (2001) quotes poet W. H. Auden as saying, . . . “it is difficult for us to believe that intellectual curiosity is a desire like any other, and to recognize that correct knowledge and truth are not identical. To apply a categorical imperative to knowing, so that, instead of asking, ‘What can

I know' we ask, 'What, at this moment, am I meant to know?'—to entertain the possibility that the only knowledge which can be true for us is the knowledge that we can live up to—that seems to all of us crazy and almost immoral" (pp. 21-22).

### Summary

In summary, we have articulated here a view of intellectual humility as it may be experienced or displayed by a Christian. Drawing primarily on Augustine, we argue that intellectual humility for the Christian is based on glad intellectual dependence on God. It is evidenced in five markers of IH: (a) proper unconcern about one's intellectual status and entitlements; (b) proper concern about one's intellectual failures and limitations; (c) proper posture of intellectual submission to divine teaching; (d) order epistemic attitudes that properly reflect one's justification for one's views, including those views held on the basis of religious testimony, church authority, interpretations of scripture, and the like; and (e) proper view of the divine orientation of inquiry. We turn now to implications of this perspective for the study of intellectual humility.

### Implications for the Study of IH

There is now research showing that religious individuals value humility more than non-religious people (Van Tongeren et al., 2017) and both self-report being more humble as well as being seen by others as being more humble (Rowatt, et al., 2014). The virtue-theorist philosopher Robert Roberts (1987) has suggested that to understand how one conceives and practices a virtue, one must take into account that person's "grammar," which is developed within a larger belief structure or logic. This is what he says:

...the rules for the virtue *name* are, in their turn, determined by the *concept* of the virtue in question—which is to say, what the virtue is like, what it includes and excludes, what it is connected with, and so forth. To say that Christian gratitude or Aristotelian pride or Rogerian congruence each have a "grammar" is just to say that the concepts of these virtues differ in determinate ways .... To know the

grammar of a virtue is to have a schematic notion of the kind of "life" lived by someone who possesses the virtue in question. (p. 193, italics original)

We have argued that IH is perhaps conceptualized and expressed with a different grammar by people who are religiously committed. There is empirical support for this general notion. Van Tongeren et al. (2017) found that an experimentally primed humility (via a written induction to describe a time when they acted humbly) led to less defensiveness (i.e., less imagined retaliation toward someone who strongly disagreed with them on a topic of personal importance) among religious participants but increased defensiveness among nonreligious participants. However, in a follow-up study, they controlled for shame and embarrassment in order to reduce the possibility that the prime made people think of humiliation rather than humility (a tendency expected more among the nonreligious). In the follow-up study, recalling humility led to reduced defensiveness for both religious and nonreligious participants. Thus, it appears that humility is understood differently between people who are religious and people who are not.

So, what is the missing element, if indeed there is one, in more fully describing the experience of humility from a theistic perspective? We suggest it is summed up well in Micah 6:8, a passage frequently found on bumper stickers as a theme of core Christian identity: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (NIV). Thus, within a Christian worldview—a Christian "grammar"—the call to humility is first and foremost a vertical call to how one stands in relationship to God. The other indicators are understood as figures only within the context of this background. It is the context by which humility is understood and practiced. That is, for the theist, an accurate understanding of humility must first be contextualized in what is understood by that person to be an obedient relationship to God. Thus, what might be seen as tension-producing paradoxes about humility (e.g., believing one is chosen by God without believing one is special; believing that one owns the truth through the exclusionary claims of the gospel, yet being willing to own limitations of understanding;

believing that Christ is a model of humility while also acknowledging the extraordinary claims of being the Messiah, the Son of God) is understood by the Christian as simply humble obedience to God's will.

The implications for empirical research are numerous. What we have suggested, without an explicit declaration, is that research on IH should adopt a first person accounting, especially since understanding it, like understanding other virtues, is philosophically sensitive. For example, the committed theist, the agnostic, and the atheist all have worldviews through which IH, and virtues in general, are interpreted and understood. Without taking into account their worldview perspective, measures of IH may not capture what they are intended to measure. The substance of what a person believes does matter in term of how IH functions in his or her life. This will require more multi-method assessments, including qualitative methodologies.

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### Authors

*Peter C. Hill (Ph.D. in Social Psychology, University of Houston) is Professor of Psychology at the*

*Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University (CA) and Editor of the Journal of Psychology and Christianity. Dr. Hill's interests include measurement issues in the psychology of religion, the integration of psychology and religion, religious fundamentalism, and the positive psychology study of humility and gratitude.*

*Kent Dunnington (Ph.D. in Philosophy, Texas A&M University) is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Biola University (CA). He is the author of *Addiction and Virtue* (InterVarsity Academic, 2011) and *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).*

*M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall (Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, Biola University) is Professor of Psychology at Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University (CA) and Associate Editor of *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Dr. Hall's research interests include the integration of psychology and theology, gender issues in evangelicalism, and meaning-making in suffering.*

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