

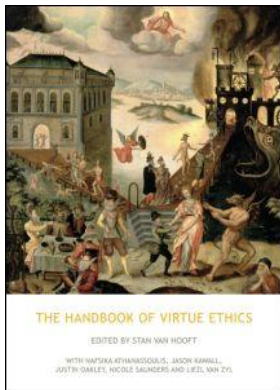
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 01 Apr 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Handbook of Virtue Ethics

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729053.ch20>

Jeanine Grenberg

Published online on: 27 Nov 2013

How to cite :- Jeanine Grenberg. 27 Nov 2013, *Humility, Kantian style from: The Handbook of Virtue Ethics* Routledge

Accessed on: 01 Apr 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729053.ch20>

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Humility, Kantian style

Jeanine Grenberg

Had [George Washington] been merely humble, he would probably have shrunk back irresolute, afraid of trusting to himself the direction of an enterprise, on which so much depended.
Mary Wollstonecraft (1996: 124)

[[H]umility ... and the whole train of the monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose ... ? We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices.
David Hume (1994: 219, 270)

WOLLSTONECRAFT AND HUME ON HUMILITY

The eighteenth century is a good place to look to appreciate the challenges one faces in trying to define humility as a virtue. For eighteenth-century figures like Wollstonecraft and Hume, humility is perceived more as a liability, a weakness – even a vice – than as a virtue. And the reasons Wollstonecraft and Hume give for their rejections of humility are not mere isolated and idiosyncratic opinions; they are, rather, not only paradigmatic of their age, but paradigmatic of the challenges that any age faces in trying to make sense of a virtue related to appreciating one's limitations.

For Wollstonecraft, humility entails a belief in one's own weakness, one that would preclude a person holding it from engaging in any decisive action. The humble person is, according to her, "irresolute": that is, indecisive, unable to trust herself, and thus incapable of great actions. If George Washington had been humble, America would never have been founded. A belief which prevents one from having confidence in one's abilities and which, ultimately, precludes the proper and worthy exercise of one's agency, hardly seems a virtue. Wollstonecraft thus rejects humility, and replaces it in the catalogue of virtues with what she calls "modesty" (1996: ch. VII).

Hume also rejects humility as a virtue, though from a somewhat different perspective than Wollstonecraft. For Hume, humility “serves to no manner of purpose” not because humble persons are insecure or weak, but because they are “monkish” types, who walk about heavy in their humility (1994: 270). This, he believes, is both a disagreeable and unproductive state, one which tends its bearer towards other disagreeable and socially unproductive states like “celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, [and] self-denial” (*ibid.*). Only the “delirious and dismal” (*ibid.*) would seek such states, consider them useful, or find them agreeable in others.

Hume’s criticism is not, however, just that we do not like to be around such persons. Indeed, he notes elsewhere that “Modesty ... give[s] pleasure to every one, who observes it” (1990: 597). A certain “modesty” in one’s demeanor is quite agreeable to other persons, even if it be painful to oneself. The main problem with humility is that it is not *useful* to society. The source of its social disutility is that the “natural, unprejudiced reason” of the would-be humble person is taken in by the “delusive glosses of superstition and false religion” (1994: 270) and, out of this misguided religious sense, becomes “monkish”. What exactly does Hume mean, though, by calling the humble person monkish? Certainly at least that the humble person acts as monks do: removing herself from all pleasures, and emphatically asserting her inferiority and unworthiness.

There seems something more, though, to the term “monkish” which, when Hume uses it, takes on a nearly derisive tone. There is in it an underlying suggestion of insincerity, or at least of inauthenticity. One might, of course, initially take on a monkish humility honestly. But even one who did would be hard pressed to maintain it as such. To be monkish is to be concerned at least as much with how one presents oneself to others as with whether one is in fact the genuine article; and this constant concern for presentation is susceptible to corruption. The would-be humble person is so anxious to present herself to others as fitting her religious ideal that she tends, often without realizing it, to place presentation above fact. She thus becomes hypocritical and self-centred, even duplicitous, and this is clearly socially useless, if not destructive. The monkishly humble person is no longer seeking to get on with her fellow human. Instead, an air of holier-than-thou, and inauthentic, inferiority and asceticism disguises a misguided, and excessively individualistic, religious purpose. The falsely humble person is the extreme, then, of Hume’s criticism of humility as monkish. Whether in its original sincere form, or this more corrupted inauthentic one, Hume finds monkishness disagreeable.

All of this is not to say, however, that Hume entirely rejects the moral value of duplicity. For, although he rejects humility as monkish, he also goes on to encourage, under the name of humility, a different sort of duplicity in one’s character: an *appearance* of humility is socially *required* of those who are in fact so superior that the truth of their superiority would be offensive to others (because it would reveal their inferiority). Hume thus ultimately endorses the precise opposite of humility: a strong sense of self-esteem, even vanity, and a recognition of one’s superiority. He praises, for example, Alexander the Great for feeling “such a dignity and right of empire, that he could not believe it possible any one could refuse to obey him ... Wherever he found men, he fancied he had found subjects” (1990: 599). His support of such a state of superiority is, furthermore, quite Wollstonecraftian in its nature: such an attitude is requisite, he believes, for production of “all those great actions and sentiments, which have become the admiration of mankind” (*ibid.*). As such, “self-satisfaction and vanity may not only be allowable, but requisite in a

character" (*ibid.*: 597). "Humility" becomes useful then only when it is introduced to bridle this pride for the purposes of smoothing social interaction. It is a restraint quite similar to that of the Aristotelian magnanimous man who knows when and how to temper his attitude before inferiors: "[W]ere we always to give vent to our sentiments in this particular, we should mutually cause the greatest indignation in each other ... [T]herefore, ... we establish the *rules of good breeding*, in order to prevent the opposition of men's pride, and render conversation agreeable and inoffensive" (*ibid.*).

This willingness to defer, to hold back on an expression of pride of which one is worthy, is the only humility which Hume is willing to admit into virtue. Hume admits both that this deference to others is merely a "disguise", and that "men of sense and merit ... are [thereby] not allow'd to do themselves justice openly" (*ibid.*: 598). Interestingly, then, humility is now assigned not to those who are truly inferior and know their limits, but rather to the truly superior who know their superiority but downplay it out of social concern. Humility is thus marginalized, since it is not a state of character that is particularly central, nor one that runs particularly deeply. "No one", says Hume " ... will assert ... that humility ... goes beyond the outside, or that a thorough sincerity in this particular is esteem'd a real part of our duty" (*ibid.*). The humility Hume ultimately endorses is thus, at its core, just as much a deception as the monkishness he rejects; it is "a genuine and hearty pride, or self-esteem, ... well conceal'd and well founded" (*ibid.*). The only difference seems to be that this deception is more successful, and thus more socially pleasing, than monkish humility.

There is a certain similarity between Hume's rejection of humility as lacking utility, and Wollstonecraft's rejection of it as undermining agency, for both of these criticisms suggest that humility is ultimately ineffectual. To say that a state "lacks utility" is, for Hume, as much as to say that it is not ultimately "good", or socially helpful. And Wollstonecraft would agree that humility is not socially useful since she suspects that it would have prevented George Washington from engaging in the activities he should have undertaken for the securing of his society. But her loss of agency concern goes beyond Hume's in suggesting that this ineffectualness comes from a weakness or lack of confidence in the agent; and this weakness is not invariably attributable to Hume's monkish humble person, who might, indeed, be quite crafty and cunning. His disadvantages to society are not so much problems with confidence or lack of self-trust, but a principled fascination with false religion that skews his values, his pleasures and his self-presentation.

There is, I think, something to be learned from both Wollstonecraft's and Hume's portrayals and rejections of humility, for, as we shall see, humility is today still portrayed in the ways in which they conceive of it; and, when it is, it should indeed be rejected in just the ways they suggest. The humilities that they reject, though, are not the kind of humility I want to defend in this chapter. Rather, these rejected humilities are, in one way or another, based in an affirmation, either actual or contrived, of one's own inferiority, and it is precisely this association of humility with inferiority (and with the flip-side of that inferiority: superiority) that we need to reject in order to appreciate humility as the virtue that it is.

To affirm humility as a virtue that accords with our deepest moral intuitions, we need an account of it that not only does not force it into egregious claims of inferiority, or ground it in vain claims of superiority, but also protects it against such painfully familiar human tendencies. If we really want to resuscitate the virtue, we need to remove ourselves from a corrupt human tendency towards egregious self-other comparison, a comparison which would be required were we to associate humility with inferiority and superiority. Doing so

requires that we instead ground the virtue in a strong affirmation of the equal worth and dignity of all persons. Immanuel Kant's approach to the virtue of humility – because it insists so centrally upon the absolute worth of persons even as we admit the intractable moral limits of these beings with absolute worth – is the perfect point of view from which to rehabilitate this misunderstood virtue and return it to its initial status as one which encapsulates that proper attitude which one takes towards one's own worth and limits as a person. It is in the ability to manage one's limitations by understanding them through the lens, or perspective, of one's dignity as a person – a dignity that one shares with all persons – that the nature of humility as a virtue can be best appreciated. Let us begin by appreciating more completely the problems we encounter when we ground humility in judgements of self–other comparison. We will then turn to the preferable Kantian approach to defining the virtue.

Loss of agency and self–other comparison

Let us begin by appreciating that the problems Wollstonecraft and Hume have identified in the would-be virtue of humility – loss of agency and monkish duplicity – arise precisely when the virtue of proper self-assessment, and especially the assessment of one's limits, is approached by judging one's own worth in comparison to others. Wollstonecraft laments the loss of agency in the would-be humble person and Hume deplores the holier-than-thou monkishness which hangs upon him; but both these pictures of failed humility are precisely the likely outcomes when the would-be humble person makes judgements about herself by relying implicitly on judgements about her value in relation to and comparison with other persons. Indeed, for both Hume and Wollstonecraft, the humble person is one who makes a comparison of herself with *others* the very ground of how she assesses *herself*. This is how the effort at proper self-assessment gets off track.

To appreciate the connection of a “humble” loss of agency with self–other comparison, let us turn to another historical figure from whom we can gain an appreciation of this connection, St Paul. Consider, for example, this passage from Phillipians, in which St Paul clearly supports reliance on self–other comparison in order to assess oneself as humble: “Rivalry and personal vanity should have no place among you, *but you should humbly reckon others better than yourselves*” (Philippians 2.3, emphasis added). In an effort to encourage people not to think themselves *better* than others, Paul, instead of encouraging a complete abandonment of self–other comparison, encourages them to think themselves *worse* than others.

This commitment to making comparative judgements among persons to organize their social interactions guides the advice which Paul gives to specific communities. Consider, for example, this passage from Corinthians, in which Paul encourages comparison of women with men, a comparison which results in a clear “pecking order” of superiority and inferiority:

I wish you to understand that, while every man has Christ for his Head, woman's head is man, as Christ's head is God ... A man has no need to cover his head, because man is the image of God, and the mirror of his glory, whereas woman reflects the glory of man. For man did not originally spring from woman, but woman was made out of man; and man was not created for woman's sake, but woman for the sake of man; and therefore it is woman's duty to have a sign of authority on her head, out of regard for the angels. (1 Corinthians 11:3–11)

Paul demands here the deference of women not simply to God in recognition of a common human tendency towards transgression of law, but also to men – in recognition of the latter’s purportedly superior position. Essentially, man is to woman as God is to man; and, to be successfully humble, women must make this judgement of themselves as inferior to men. If we are going to rely on self–other comparison to judge the worth of persons, the inevitable outcome is claims of inferiority and superiority.

When one relies upon such comparative judgements of inferiority and superiority to ground humility, one might still base one’s judgements on genuine differences in virtue, or at least perceived virtue; but more often, as here, these judgements tend to involve less than moral criteria. Women’s inferiority, according to St Paul, is based not on true moral inferiority, but on their lower social position. The humility that results from dependence upon such judgements of inferiority and superiority is thus no longer concerned with moral qualities, but is extended to, perhaps replaced by, concerns for more idiosyncratic non-moral features – how much money one makes, one’s gender, one’s social standing, one’s non-moral talents and abilities – which, through the importance they are given, are raised to moral considerations. Instead of being an opportunity for solidarity among humans, the appeal to humility thus becomes an opportunity to make radical and intractable distinctions in non-moral worth among persons. Humility thus becomes a tool for solidifying various social strata within a society. In such a world, in order to be virtuous – in order to be *humble* – an agent must accept herself as inferior.

Furthermore, reliance on comparative judgements of inferiority and superiority to ground humility leads St Paul to assert differences in the exercise of agency to which various groups are entitled, and it is here that we discover the crucial Wollstonecraftian connection between humility and loss of agency: “As in all congregations of God’s people, women should not address the meeting. They have no license to speak, but should keep their place as the law directs. If there is something they want to know, they can ask their own husbands at home. It is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation” (1 Corinthians 14:34–5).

The insistence that some persons are inferior to others and must, therefore, be more humble than others – covering their heads, not speaking in public, and the like – is, just as Wollstonecraft worried, an acceptance of inferiority which results in a reduction of agency. This inferiority is established by judging one’s worth or status through comparing oneself to others, and finding oneself at the short end of the stick.

False humility and self–other comparison

Wollstonecraft’s worries that humility entails a loss of agency can thus be traced to the grounding of humility in comparative judgements of self with others. But Hume’s worries about humility descending into a disagreeable and duplicitous monkishness rely no less upon a grounding of the state in comparative judgements than the Wollstonecraftian collapse of humility into loss of agency does. That is because the introduction of comparative judgements to humility brings with it the simultaneous development of a concern for what others will think of oneself; and it is this focus in one’s self-assessment upon how others will view oneself that opens the door to false humility. A truly humble person would be most concerned to know and judge *herself* as best she can.¹ But when the self–other comparative standard of judgement is accepted, and when making distinctions of inferiority

and superiority among persons thus becomes more central in the attribution of humility, the *public presentation* of oneself as inferior or superior and, with that, the concern to *appear* to others to be what one is, also becomes more important. This is true not only for those who believe themselves inferior as a result of such comparisons, but also for those who come out on the superior end of the stick in the self–other comparison.

The phenomenon of false humility thus relies on a valuing of self–other comparison for its genesis: in order for false humility to develop, it is necessary that true humility be thought to involve the humble person's acceptance of her inferiority relative to other persons, and further, that both the humble and the more superior be concerned to present themselves to others as such. Without these assumptions, falseness in humility – that is, the ascendancy of *presenting* oneself as humble over *actually* being humble – cannot take hold.

One can, furthermore, appreciate why a tendency towards the falsification of humility would arise, if the true version of it is indeed this state of comparing oneself against others. This sort of humility, when seen from the perspective of the inferior person forced to take it on, is ultimately a sentencing to public humiliation and self-degradation. The only way for the inferior to avoid such degradation is to take the duplicitous, monkish route: that is, cunningly to attempt, through the apparent, but deceptive, acceptance of one's humility, to seek ascendancy over others and ultimately to become one of the superior ones. Such is the ultimate goal of Hume's monkishly humble person: not inferiority, but superiority.

In false humility, the virtuous state of humility is thus fully corrupted: it is no longer concerned at all with moral evaluation; instead, it becomes an expression of social distinctions based on idiosyncratic non-moral judgements. It is no longer concerned with self-evaluation, but rather becomes a game in which one hopes to manipulate others into believing certain things to be true about oneself. Humility becomes false not simply because an agent is seeking to portray herself as possessing a virtue which in fact she does not; rather, humility becomes false when an agent loses any genuine concern for true self-evaluation. Instead of seeking to know herself, her capacities and limits, and thus achieving an awareness of her finite agency, the agent develops an intense and primary concern to be perceived as virtuous by others and therefore emphatically to profess her virtue to them, even if this has to be done falsely.

False humility is thus the offspring of the secret marriage of humility with comparative judgements. Once a concern for presentation becomes primary, any concern for an underlying state of character to match that presentation is made secondary and, eventually, lost entirely. The falsely humble person has lost any interest in whether or not she truly *is* humble.

Although I have focused on how Wollstonecraft's, Hume's and St Paul's understandings of humility rely upon self–other comparison, my point in so doing is not a merely historical one. Indeed, recent attempts to define humility rely just as much upon comparison of self to others as these historical figures do. Norvin Richards makes the comparative point most dramatically:

Suppose, for example, that you have just had an article accepted by a leading journal. You have never been successful there before. In fact, this is much better than you ever did earlier in your career, and as you think of your progress, you are pleased. There are other ways to look at things, though. How does your work compare to what your colleagues are doing? To the work of contemporaries at similar

institutions? To that of the leading philosophers of the day? To the Nicomachean Ethics, or the Theory of Descriptions? (1988a: 255–6)

For Richards, humility is “having an accurate sense of oneself”, and especially a self-concept which avoids “think[ing] *too much* of oneself”, all managed by this tendency to compare oneself against others more accomplished so as to assure proper perspective (*ibid.*: 254). Most other recent commentators on humility have followed suit. David Horner, for example, speaks of humility as a state which “honors others and esteems them as *superior*” (1988: 434). Stephen Hare speaks of moral humility as “accurate assessment of one’s own relative moral superiority” (1996: 240). And Vance Morgan, who in fact finds this emphasis on self-evaluation to be excessive, nonetheless claims that humility involves believing oneself “to be *beneath* others ... in order to bring about an evaluative equilibrium” (2001: 315–16). Contemporary accounts of humility have thus relied upon comparisons of inferiority and superiority among persons no less than the problematic versions of humility rejected by Hume and Wollstonecraft. Accordingly, these contemporary versions of humility will be subject to the same problems which Hume and Wollstonecraft identify: namely, that humility will be a virtue that is not really a virtue, since it so easily becomes associated with loss of agency and duplicity.

HUMILITY, KANTIAN STYLE

If we are going to define humility while avoiding such games of inferiority and superiority, we need some other basis upon which to judge and assess ourselves than against others. We need, on the one hand, a standard that transcends my own desiring, conscious, choosing self and which thus gives me some perspective on that self; but which, on the other, is a standard most appropriate for judging the status and worth of that self; a standard that is, really, that self’s own standard. We can discover this most appropriate standard of self-assessment by exploring humility, Kantian style. This is a humility – that is, a virtue of proper self-assessment of both worth and limits – which is accomplished not via comparison of self to others, but instead via comparison of self to one’s own higher self as identified in one’s own capacity for autonomous legislation of moral standards.

We begin by appreciating Kant’s strong emphasis on the equal and absolute worth of all persons:

[A] human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in himself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts respect for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them. (1996: 6:434–5/186)

There are a few important things to note about this assertion of the absolute value of persons. The first is that Kant’s assertion of absolute value to all rational beings, and the picture of human nature that undergirds that claim, provide a new perspective or

point of view from which to begin taking on the question of one's own worth overall. Without the assertion of *absolute* value, an individual looking to assess her worth really has nowhere to turn other than to comparative, *relative* value – and for her, that means turning to other persons – in order to begin finding a standard of judging her worth. But Kant's more complex understanding of the human being as a "person" introduces a claim of value internal to the individual agent's own self. As this quote suggests, a "person" is a being who is "the subject of a morally practical reason", that is, who can find within herself rational principles which guide action. Kant insists that even the most common (that is, non-philosophically informed) human being is capable of appreciating the nature of categorical moral demands arising from her person – that is, from her own best self – if only she pays attention honestly to the very familiar conflict between happiness and morality. It is this ability to recognize not only that there are moral demands in the world but also that one's best self is the source of these moral demands which assures that any individual agent has a more proper starting point for assessing her worth than one which would begin by comparing herself to other persons. No matter what – and especially no matter whether other people are better than me at a variety of activities, moral and otherwise – I am a being who, because I have these standards of moral and rational action within me, is a being of *absolute* value, a value that cannot be relativized, traded away, and upon which one cannot put a price. I simply do not need to compare myself with other persons in order to assess my worth; I need look only at myself.

Furthermore, when I recognize this fact about myself, I have a new perspective from which to consider my relationship to other persons. Whatever may be true about differences between us in terms of abilities, talents and moral standing, all persons whom I encounter are just that: persons. As such, I begin my encounters with other persons by "valu[ing] [my]self on a footing of *equality* with them" (1996: 6:435/186, emphasis added). I have argued elsewhere (Grenberg 2005) that this emphasis on the equal worth of persons is not only an interesting and robust moral claim, but also a point of view from which individual persons can settle otherwise disturbing and all-pervasive worries about whether one is a valuable being or not. If I am a person, I am not only valuable; I am a being of *absolute* value, and disturbing worries that I might in fact be, at my very basis, inferior to others, dissipate. Even if it turns out that someone else is smarter than me, or of higher social rank than me, such admissions do nothing to undermine a claim of worth that is absolute rather than relative. Indeed, instead of worrying that I am inferior to others, I recognize that I am on an equal footing with others, and have a basis both for respecting myself and, indeed, for expecting others to do similarly.

One might wonder at this point what all of this has to do with humility. Is not humility an attitude in which I come to terms with my limits and failings? If so, why focus on respect for one's absolute value? As we have already been hinting, the answer to this question is that an emphasis on one's unquestioned and absolute value provides that stable point of view from which one can successfully and reliably assess one's limits and failings; a point of view which allows one to exit the comparative games about whether one is better or worse than other people and focus instead upon whether one is valuable. These are, after all, two distinct questions: "Am I valuable?" and "Am I better than you?" The answer to the latter could be "no" while the answer to former could still be "yes!" To assess oneself properly, and thus to have a proper ground for one's virtue of humility, one thus needs insistently to be asking the former, not the latter question. And by starting with a

recognition of one's own absolute value as a person, the self-evaluation game shifts: I now have a point of view from which to ask the question of whether I am a valuable being without asking whether I am better than other persons. Indeed, even that latter question is resolved more satisfactorily by recognizing that, even when it is raised, the first thing to say about myself in comparison with other persons is that we share an equal, and absolute, worth.

The story of one's self-evaluation does not, however, end here. If I am a person of absolute value in virtue of my capacity to recognize rational moral standards which I impose upon myself, I am also a human being who sometimes does and sometimes doesn't follow those standards. According to Kant, then, a person "should value himself by a low as well as by a high standard" (1996: 6:435/187). This does not mean I should find some other standard than my moral, rationally legislating self by which to judge myself. Rather, it means that, even as I recognize myself "by a high standard" – as the autonomously legislating source of moral demands – I must simultaneously recognize myself "by a low ... standard" – as someone tempted to pervert these standards in the name of the achievement of my own happiness.

This tendency to pervert the true nature of moral demands will eventually be understood by Kant as "radical evil" (Kant 1998). But we can understand what he means without those more religious overtones by looking back to the *Groundwork* to see how he describes the conflict between happiness and morality, a conflict which Kant takes to be a phenomenologically identifiable, and very common, human experience:

The human being feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty, which reason represents to him as so deserving of the highest respect – the counterweight of his needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name happiness ... But from this [conflict between the demands of duty and the counterweight of happiness] there arises a natural dialectic, that is, a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, that is, to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity. (1996: 4:405/17–18)

Kant's point here is that, in an effort to give preference to the inclinations and interests which form the basis of our happiness, we have a tendency to corrupt and undermine the very laws which form the basis of our absolute value. It is this complex picture of the human being as a being of absolute value who violates the very standards that form the basis of her value that provides the most adequate basis for understanding both the nature and the centrality of the virtue of humility in human lives. Kant puts the point most clearly in his discussion of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

The moral law is holy (inflexible) and demands holiness of morals, although all the moral perfection that a human being can attain is still only virtue, that is, a disposition conformed with law from respect for law, and thus consciousness of a continuing propensity to transgression or at least impurity, that is, an admixture of many spurious (not moral) motives to observe the law, hence *a self-esteem combined with humility*. (1968: 5:128/107, emphases altered)

We have here the clearest summary of what the most proper virtue of self-evaluation consists in: it is a simultaneous awareness of one's absolute value combined with a unflinching admission that one will always fall short of those moral standards which are one's very own. "Self-esteem combined with humility" is thus that virtuous attitude of self-evaluation most appropriate to a human being.

We are very far now from that humility which established itself through comparison of oneself with other persons. There, we found humility to be a state most appropriately associated with inferiority, or with duplicitous efforts to prove oneself superior. Now we find humility to involve an admission of one's *failures*, but not of one's *inferiority* to other persons. Certainly, some will be better, and others worse, at following those moral demands central to our natures. But such comparisons are not the judgements that a humble person makes. Rather, as Kant himself insists: "Humility *in comparing oneself with other human beings* ... is no duty; rather, trying to equal or surpass others in this respect, believing that in this way one will get an even greater inner worth, is ambition (*ambitio*), which is directly contrary to one's duty to others" (1996: 6:435/187).

Kant's psychological insight here is notable: when we compare ourselves with others and find ourselves lacking, we are not really being humble; often, we are really just trying to impress others with a holier-than-thou religiosity. This was exactly Hume's worry about humility being nothing more than a monkish – that is, a false – virtue. Kant agrees with Hume to this extent: if we try to ground humility in self–other comparison, we will fail to acquire a virtue. Indeed, all we will have accomplished is to fall victim to the very selfish human tendency to try to prove ourselves better than others. We only lose ourselves in childish games of inferiority and superiority.²

Against Hume, Kant has found a more proper ground for humility: "True humility follows unavoidably from our sincere and exact comparison of ourselves with the moral law" (*ibid.*: 6:436/187). The proper way to come to terms with our limits is not to compare ourselves with others but to hold ourselves accountable to those rational moral standards we know to be most properly our own.

The further psychological insight Kant introduces to the ethics of humility is, however, to appreciate that we humans are not going to be very good at being honest with ourselves about our limits in this way *unless* we can rest assured that, at the very basis of our natures, we are actually worthy – absolutely worthy – beings:

[F]rom our capacity for internal lawgiving and from the (natural) human being's feeling himself compelled to revere the (moral) human being within his own person, *at the same time* [as we feel humility] there comes exaltation and the highest self-esteem, the feeling of his inner worth ... , in terms of which he is above any price ... and possesses an inalienable dignity ..., which instills in him respect for himself. (*Ibid.*: 6:436/187, emphasis added)

We are "internal law-giv[ers]" and, indeed, we cannot help but to feel respect for that law, even as we, at times, violate it. As such, we have a solid basis upon which to respect ourselves even as we judge ourselves. Humility, on its own, could not be the proper human virtue of self-assessment; it would be too much for humans to bear. But humility combined with self-esteem is that truly proper – because truly *human* – perspective to take upon self-assessment: an attitude within which one properly appreciates both one's abiding

dignity and absolute value on the one hand, and the clear sense of how one's motives and behaviours fall short of one's best self on the other. Humility is best understood as this complex and complete virtue of self-assessment.

NOTES

1. I do not mean to suggest that the truly humble person has absolutely no concern for how others perceive her. It is a thoroughly human need for an agent to have her worth reflected back to her in the ways that others treat and value her. But in such a case, self-evaluation remains primary: an agent believes herself worthy, and hopes for a world in which that worth is acknowledged. It is not that she abandons any concern for self-evaluation, and turns directly to convincing others that she is a particular sort of person, regardless of the sort of person she in fact is.
2. Allen Wood thus speaks of, and rightly rejects, the “comparative–competitive” mode of self-judgement. For Wood, a “comparative–competitive” model of self-worth is considered by Kant to be “the sole and exclusive ground of all moral evil” (1999: 135). For Wood, and for Kant, “human dignity, properly understood, rules out the very idea of any *comparison* or *competition* regarding self-worth” (*ibid.*: 138). To reject the *comparison* of oneself with others does not, however, rule out the possibility of certain persons exemplifying for us certain moral ideals in comparison with which we find ourselves lacking. Such comparison, as Wood emphasizes, is best understood not as comparison in the basic worth, or even in the specific virtues, of one person against another. It is, rather, a comparison of oneself against the moral principles which the worthy person exemplifies.