

“Ashes to Ashes, Humus to Humus: Humility and Humanism”

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## INTRODUCTION

If you use Twitter even half as often as our commander in chief, you have probably run across the hashtag #humblebrag, as one word. “Humblebrags” run the gamut from the fact that someone just set up a Twitter account successfully, to landing big jobs and buying yachts. “Humblebrags” are . . . in the eye of the beholder, and they as often as not reflect the famous line from the comedian Bob Hope: “I feel very humble, but I think I have the strength of character to fight it.”

Reading through a couple of dozen “humblebrags” reveals much about the human condition—some of us revel in small, everyday, achievements while others will use humbleness for the purpose of braggadocio. Some of us are humbled by the daily challenges of life, while others see only the mountains that need to be climbed.

One thing we do know for sure: the humble don’t brag.

Everyone knows that humility is a virtue. Its opposite is . . . what? bragging? hubris? Excessive pride?

Well, anyway, something not good.

But what does humility look like? And—since its a virtue and therefore something good to have—how do we achieve it? It’s going to take more than a hashtag!

In an April 15, 2017 op-ed for the *New York Times*, Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, published an article titled “The Quiet Power of Humility.” Mr. Wehner praises humility, and opines that this virtue comes from modeling oneself on Christ.

This assertion comes as no surprise, since the think tank that Mr. Wehner is part of is, quote, “dedicated to applying the Judeo-Christian moral tradition to critical issues of public policy.”

As someone who grew up among very humble people—my parents would never have dreamed of looking an educated or wealthy person in the eye—I’ve seen socially-induced humility.

My first question is—*who* decides who is humble? Is that what it’s about—I see the virtue of humbleness in you? Or is it something achieved and self-realized? Does humbleness serve the status quo, or the self? Perhaps it’s both/and?

## ONE

In traditional Christian theology, *kenosis*—a Greek word meaning “emptiness”—has come to describe the idea that God, in the form of Jesus Christ, part of the Holy Trinity, “emptied” himself—at least partially—of divinity and became human to dwell among us.

How much “emptying” took place is debatable. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is human except for his extreme compassion; in the Gospel of John, Jesus can read people’s minds and knows the future.

The articulation of this theology occurs in the book of Philippians: “But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men” ( 2:7 King James Version).

If indeed Jesus was hanging out in heaven as part of the Trinity and made the decision to “empty” himself of omnipotence, that was an act of humbleness.

That sort of humility well describes the people I grew up among: they were of “no reputation,” and took the form of servants. In other words, this traditional reading of *kenosis* perfectly described the European peasant class. My parents could identify.

A little higher up the social ladder, Unitarian minister and scientist Joseph Priestly saw it another way—Jesus “humbled” himself in the Garden of Gethsemane when he made the decision to follow God’s wishes and suffer death. This made considerably more sense than the older tradition to people who *had* choices in life.

From the Judeo- part of the tradition comes the words of the prophet Micah:

It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the LORD doth require of thee: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.  
(Mechon Mamre)

(I’m not bashing Judeo-Christian tradition, but I do think that aspects of it creates problems for us all.)

In the Roman Catholic tradition, there are seven virtues: *Prudentia, Castitas, Temperantia, Caritas, Patientia, Benevolentia, Humilitas.*

In English, that’s Prudence, Chastity, Temperance, Charity, Patience, Kindness, and Humility. The fact that the Latin words for these virtues are recognizable in English points to how saturated Western culture is in this Christian teaching.

The human desire to do good and eschew evil is partly revealed in that the Latin words for the Seven Deadly Sins are more difficult to see in the English language: *superbia* is pride; *avaritia* is (avarice) greed; *luxuria* is lust; *invidia* is envy; *gula* is gluttony; *ira* is wrath; and *acedia* is sloth—not quite as common.

The deadly sins and the virtues are largely social in nature. Humility is good for society.

## TWO

One of the problems with Mr. Wehner's insistence that humility is a Judeo-Christian moral tradition is that other traditions teach humbleness as well. Humility appears to be a pan-human emotion. For example, the Nez Perce of the Pacific Northwest remind themselves, "Every animal knows more than you do." A Zen adage reminds us, "When you see a fault in someone, go correct it in yourself." The Daodejing (from China) advises,

...

Those free of themselves  
are free from egotism.

Therefore, they shine;

they are free from showiness,  
therefore are distinguished;

free from bragging,  
therefore noticed;

free from self-complacency,

therefore, accomplished.

Because they  
do not strive,  
no one strives  
against them.

In the old days it was said,  
"The partial becomes complete."

This is not a vain saying. (*Daodejing* 22)

I could go on and on . . . Humility is a basic human emotion. It's good for society, and in some aspects it's good for the self.

The English word "humility" comes from the Latin word *humilitas*. That word in turn derives from the Latin word for the earth, *humus*. Close to the earth. Grounded.

The English word "humble" is of the same origin, though the influence of church Latin.

The language is telling us the naturalistic meaning of the word: stay grounded; keep perspective; remember that you are part of the continuum of existence.

THREE

One of the most persistent cliches about Humanists is that we are human-o-centric and egotistical. It is true that the term "humanist" sounds like a wild claim for the abilities of the human. It's also true that humanism contained some rah-rah for human

progress a century ago. But it's good to remember that Humanists accept the contemporary understanding of evolution, which tells us that we evolved on the savannah of Africa, and that this fact has implications—we are risen apes, not fallen angels.

Humanists assume that we humans perceive those things that are useful for survival on the savannah. Other perceptions—things such as X-rays and microwaves and other dimensions—we perceive through various applied technologies that extend our senses. Still, we are aware that human beings are one among many animals, albeit—when we try—we can sometimes be rational animals . . . for short bursts of time.

The term “humanism,” like the word “theism,” is a product of the past and does not adequately describe current understandings. In short, humanists look at the history of humanity and—far from egotism—we take pause and often hang our heads.

However, we believe that human beings create human problems and that only human beings can solve those problems in a way that is satisfactory to humanity. For example, global climate change will resolve; the question is whether or not human beings will be around on the planet when it does.

Humanists know that what we humans know is always time-bound and often culture-specific. Knowledge is contingent.

We know that knowledge has a half-life—that is, knowledge is superseded by new knowledge. For example, in 1930, an engineering degree had a half-life of thirty-five years—it took thirty-five years for half of what the engineer had learned in school to become wrong. In 1960, an engineering degree had a half-life of ten years; today . . . knowledge is exploding and old ideas explode along with the knowledge. Today, a degree in psychology has a half-life of five years—in five years, half of what we think we know today about psychology will have been superseded.

Knowing this makes us humble.

Beyond the humanist refusal to be theo-centric or human-o-centric, we also—despite the name—refuse to be speciesist. We are aware that primates have a niche in the natural system, and that all species by nature do best when they exist within their niches. The human failure to do so has led to mass extinctions and irreparable damage to the planet. The survival of human beings is very much in question, therefore, and humanists see this situation as unfortunate for us . . . but our own darn fault.

Humanism does not say, as we are so often accused, that “man” is the measure of all things, a quote from the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras. (This is in fact a misunderstanding of Protagoras., by the way.) Rather we say that humankind measures all things in the framework of our limited perspective. Far from being a statement of absolute knowledge, this actually says that we are locked in the prison house of our own senses and subjectivity. Our species measures all things to our peril, and, unfortunately, we are seldom if ever able to get outside of ourselves and our opinions long enough to understand another form of measure. We know that the Nez Perce are correct when they say, “Every animal knows more than you do.”

Consider our attempts to figure out what television looks like to dogs and cats. We know that they can't see TV as we see it . . . Protagoras taught us that because we find ourselves measuring all things, we must be ever humble and questioning due to the fact that we can seldom transcend ourselves and will never know very much about animals or plants or even our own minds. Knowledge is largely an illusion; wisdom teaches us this; and humility keeps us from staggeringly stupid moves. (Sometimes.)

Most of humankind no longer lives in the environment for which we evolved. We have adapted somewhat, but we are always fish out of water, as it were. Our attempts to understand the cosmos have run up against the fact that the cosmos—if it has any meaning or purpose at all—has no meaning or purpose comprehensible to human beings. Humanists are not terrified—or even worried—about this, however, and we

certainly don't have a big head about it. It is, rather, a source of awe and wonder and humility.

## CONCLUSION

I think the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson perhaps sums up the best philosophy for how to act in this world—this is in your order of service this morning: “We are not predestined to reach any goal, nor are we answerable to any power but our own. Only wisdom based on self-understanding, not piety, will save us.”

Wisdom. Not dreams. Humility, not hubris.

Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly . . . . Since Humanists think that our “creator” is nature, we know the best course of action is to stay close to the humus and plan to rejoin the undifferentiated molecules one day.

Humility. It's about the compassion that comes from knowing you're part of the flow of all things. It's about laughing at yourself and realizing we're tribal animals, oh so interdependent upon all of the web of life and so dependent upon others of our species. It's about knowing the sun will burn out one day. It's about realizing that time passes and that life is about loss and love and going on despite and because of it all.

Humility. Religions teach it. But it goes deeper than that.

The Judeo-Christian notion of humility, built from the direction of assuming that humanity is the crown of creation, gets it backwards. (Many human creation myths do this.) Humanists think that it is we who created our stories and our gods. It is we who

enthroned our gods; it is we who find it so difficult to keep idols—including ego and money—out of the temples.

Humanists think that our meaning will always be human meaning. As E.O. Wilson puts it:

. . . it is that the accidents of history, not the intentions of a designer, are the source of meaning. There is no advance design, but instead overlapping networks of physical cause and effect.

The last piece in the humility puzzle, I think, is forgiveness. Forgiveness of the self and others for being human, for being humus, for being temporary conglomerations of these particular molecules. Forgiveness of our lives for never being quite what we expect or what we want.

Forgiveness of reality itself for not being the well-plotted drama with a happy ending that we wish it were.

Humbleness is about realizing that meaning is a human invention in an inhuman reality; realizing that we are “accidents of history,” not a project of the gods; realizing that all that we love and lose are blips in space and time; realizing that all we know is contingent and temporary; realizing that all we have is each other . . . if that doesn’t redefine our hashtag #humblebrag . . . nothing will.

## Source

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