

Humility: from sacred virtue to secular vice?

Eve Garrard and David McNaughton

NOT FOR CITATION

Some of the virtues have a very stable place in our understanding of goodness – beneficence and courage are unlikely ever to lose their high standing. But other virtues have something like a life cycle: they move from a marginal status to to a central one, and sometimes they move back again to the margins, or even beyond the domain of virtue altogether. Chastity is one example of this; humility is another. There was a period in which humility wasn't a virtue at all (see Aristotle on the great-souled man); with the rise of Christianity (blessed are the meek) it became, not a cardinal, but still a central, virtue, though possibly more honoured in the breach than in the observance; now in the post-Christian world it seems, if a virtue at all, a somewhat creepy one. Why is this – what is it about humility that made it so important during the Christian period, and now makes us so ambivalent about it? And is there any way of rescuing it for a secular context, so that we can once again wholeheartedly endorse and admire it as one of the virtues?

There are a wide variety of conceptions of humility, and our aim is to try to delineate the most attractive and coherent version which, we maintain, can resist the criticisms levelled against some other conceptions. It is not the only conception, and some of the other ones will reveal something about why this disposition evinces such half-hearted approval, and sometimes such whole-hearted disapproval, from us. But our contention will be that somewhere in the neighbourhood of humility there is a coherent character trait which is morally admirable to possess, and which doesn't emanate the creepiness which some of the less satisfactory conceptions do.

I

So that we can focus on what seem to us the interesting issues, we begin by being upfront about some of the assumptions we make.

1 It seems to be true of the virtues generally (though there may be exceptions) that there is a conformity between outward behavior and inward stance. The benevolent person, as the etymology suggests, does not merely concern herself with good works: she genuinely cares about the needs and sufferings of others. Without that inner orientation, she would be merely beneficent. If humility is a virtue, it will conform to this pattern. It might seem that modesty stands to humility as beneficence to benevolence. Modesty, we might think, is like politeness – we can be polite whatever our private opinions of those we meet. However, in the recent philosophical literature, there has been a

resurgence of interest in both modesty and humility, conceived as virtues. Those who have discussed modesty as a virtue have all assumed that it requires a conformity between inward stance and behavior. So construed, the difference between modesty and humility seems slight. We have, therefore, felt free to draw on discussions of both topics in this paper.¹

2 We take it as a serious strike against any account that it requires the humble person to be ignorant of, or have a distorted or inadequate conception of, the facts. For we take virtues to be excellences, and cognitive deficiencies are not a mark of excellence. As several writers have noted, there seems to be a special problem about self-knowledge in the case of humility. It might appear that to recognize that one has the excellence of humility would itself be evidence that one was not yet sufficiently humble. Note, however, that if this line of thought were correct, a humble person would be unable to recognize that she had *any* excellent qualities, which seems a severe cognitive handicap. A crux for any account of humility will be how it deals with the case of the high achiever. It is easy to be humble or modest when, as Churchill said of Attlee, one has a lot to be modest about.²

3 Because virtues are excellences, any account of humility needs to explain why it is good for, and attractive to, its possessor, and not just to those who have to do with the humble person. An account that allies humility too closely with traits like self-abasement, servility, or wimpishness will, in our view, fail to meet this condition.

II

We set ourselves three main tasks in this paper. First, to enquire what humility is. Second, to ask what is good about it. Third, to enquire what reflections might promote a humble attitude and why. These discussions will, of necessity, intertwine. In the course of our discussion we uncover an apparent asymmetry between the humble person's view of, and attitude towards, herself, and her view of, and attitude towards others. This asymmetry has not, to our knowledge, been

¹ We do not mean to assert that there are no differences between the two concepts. Here are some. First, humility, but not modesty, is the right term to use when reacting with awe or wonder to one's place in the scheme of things. One can be humbled, but not made modest, by the immensity of the universe. Second, one can be modest about X, but not Y. It would be odd to say that one was humble about X, but not Y. Contrast the locution "Oh, you are just being modest about ..." with "Oh, you are just being humble about ...".

² Hume famously thought humility one of those "monkish virtues" that should be transferred into the catalogue of vices. Boswell's wonderful account of his last interview with Hume, whom he visited as he "lay adying" suggests that Hume believed that the self-aware high achiever could not but be proud of his achievements (and, presumably, that such pride was incompatible with humility). "I asked him if he was not religious when he was young. He said he was, and he used to read *The Whole Duty of Man*; that he made an abstract from the catalogue of vices at the end of it, and examined himself by this, leaving out murder and theft and such vices as he had no chance of committing, having no inclination to commit them. This, he said, was strange work; for instance, to try if, notwithstanding his excelling his schoolfellows, he had no pride or vanity. He smiled in ridicule of this as absurd and contrary to fixed principles and necessary consequences ..."

discussed in the literature, so we conclude by asking whether it makes sense, especially in the light of our second assumption, that the humble person's view of the world should not be inaccurate or distorted. We conclude that the asymmetry is intelligible and defensible. Consequently, any accounts that attempt to ground humility in some thought about the imperfections of humans in general fail to explain the asymmetry and are, to that extent, inadequate.

III

There are two principal accounts of humility in the literature which focus on the beliefs about the self which are held by the humble person. The first explicates humility in terms of low self-assessment of one's achievements and merits; the second in terms of accurate self-assessment. No doubt many humble people are in fact inclined to downplay their own achievements, but is it a necessary condition of being humble that one engage in low self-assessment? Our second assumption leads us to reject any account that has it that the humble person must be to some degree ignorant of her own achievements, or of their worth. Julia Driver has offered such an account of modesty: the modest person is one who underestimates their accomplishments. We join a number of writers (Ridge, Schueler) in finding her account unsatisfying on several further counts. It breaches our third, as well as our second, assumption, for its value lies solely in its social effects – in the way in which it soothes the touchy amour propre of the less modest. But, as Ridge points out, obsequiousness has the same effect, but that does not make it a virtue. As Statman points out, including ignorance makes humility involuntary, whereas, one might think, the acquisition and retention of virtue is voluntary. A defender of Driver's general approach might respond that one could cultivate ignorance by, for example, avoiding examining evidence of one's own brilliance. But that raises the standard problem with such self-deceptive strategies: namely, that, in order really to believe that one's achievements were lower than they are, one would have to forget that one had cultivated one's ignorance and been selective in the evidence. None of this sounds hopeful as an account of a virtue. Finally, as Schueler points out, Driver's analysis produces highly counter-intuitive results. One who ranks himself second in the world in some field of endeavor, and boasts inordinately about that fact, counts as modest if he is in fact first in rank.

This last objection to Driver shows that one can underestimate one's achievements whilst retaining a pretty high opinion of them. One could overcome this last problem for the low-estimation account of humility by insisting that the humble person is one whose opinion of her own achievements is not merely lower than is accurate, but is low simpliciter. But that manoeuvre would not avoid the other objections.

Having a lower than accurate opinion of oneself or one's achievements is not necessary for humility, nor is it sufficient; it may be part of a general attitude of self-loathing, and such people are not necessarily humble – in fact their self-

hatred is often a sign of an absorption in or obsession with the self that seems to be incompatible with humility. It's true that some people who are often regarded as exemplars of humility have thought of themselves as especially undeserving - St. Francis, for example, is reported (Englebert, pp. 78-9) as declaring himself to be "the greatest of sinners", adding that "if God had granted the same graces to the lowest criminal, he would have profited by it ten times more". But really this is the kind of remark that gives humility a bad name. On this picture, the humble person not only sees himself in a false light, but positively wallows in his unworthiness. What is more, Francis's conception of humility, as reported here, is competitive. He does not simply declare that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; he declares himself to be the worst. But this inverse competitiveness (which unfortunately seems to pervade many of the stories about Francis) smacks not so much of humility as of a form of spiritual pride.

Underestimating one's achievements is, then, neither necessary nor sufficient for humility. In section VI we will discuss more extensively our view that a person may rightly believe herself to be highly competent, but take an attitude to that competence which amounts to humility – that is, we will try to defend the view that correct self-assessment is compatible with but insufficient for humility, and that a further attitudinal condition is required. But before that, we turn to an examination of the second principal account of humility in terms of beliefs about the self: the view that correct self-assessment is what actually constitutes humility.

IV

On the face of it this seems unpromising, since on this account Aristotle's megalopsuchos, the great-souled man who correctly rates himself very highly, would come out as possessing humility, which seems profoundly implausible. However a number of writers have tried to reinstate humility as a secular virtue by offering accounts in which it *consists* of "accurate self-assessment, often with special emphasis on non-overestimation ... of one's merits" (Hare, p. 235). By eschewing the religious perspective, they avoid any suggestion that humility requires its possessor to think of himself as utterly worthless and contemptible. Against what yardstick, then, should we measure ourselves? One answer is this: other people's achievements. Grenberg argues, fairly persuasively, that many of the proponents of this view do take others as the correct comparator, whether explicitly or implicitly. The obvious difficulty with this view is that I may accurately rate my achievements very highly, as compared with those of others. While such a self-assessment may be *compatible* with humility, it is unclear how it might *generate* humility. And it will not do, for example, to say that I should recall that there are better philosophers than I, since there are also many who are worse, and for the great philosophers, there aren't even many who are better. And, for the lucky few at the top, that belief will be false. So how can they be humble?

Faced with this difficulty, some proponents of this view reach for the claim that we are all worthy of equal respect, and none is entitled to more than anyone else. One problem with this view is that, in the sense in which it is true, it is not very helpful, and in the sense in which it is helpful it is not true. We can distinguish between what Darwall (1977) dubs recognition respect and appraisal respect. The first is the kind of respect we give to poisonous snakes – we give appropriate consideration to their dangerousness when approaching them. And it is this kind of respect, albeit of a more positive kind, that we give to all persons equally. All are to be treated in certain ways simply in virtue of their personhood. Being worthy of recognition respect is certainly not something about which one can get uppity, since all deserve it equally in virtue simply of being persons, but it is also not the dimension of respect on which lie arrogance and humility. Humility based on beliefs about the self and its achievements requires a contrast case, real or possible. And the kind of respect which is due to all of us on account of our personhood does not furnish the appropriate contrast case. However, appraisal respect (or esteem) – ie the respect which we give people on account of their accomplishments, achievements, and other excellences - does come in degrees and should, of course, be proportioned to merit. So this kind of respect will provide us with the possibility of a contrast case against which a person's assessments of her own achievements may rightly be a humble one. But here the problem of the high achiever arises again: how can one who has an accurate assessment of her own outstanding merits be humble?

V

One natural suggestion is that an appropriate contrast case for the high achiever is not comparison with others, but with some suitably humbling benchmark. Christians have, of course, traditionally compared our imperfections with God's perfections. If humility is to be reinstated as a secular virtue, then that way is barred. We need a secular standard that is sufficiently awe-inspiring, but one which doesn't lead to despair or to a self-loathing wallow. Some, such as Grenberg and Kupfer, appeal to the moral law to provide this standard.³ On a broadly Kantian conception, the moral law is both humbling and uplifting. Humbling because it categorically demands allegiance, irrespective of our weakness or reluctance; inspiring because obedience is possible, though difficult. Since we ought to achieve these standards, we can. Further, in announcing our inherent dignity, it avoids that self-denigration that infects some Christian accounts of humility.

Is humility, then, an awareness of one's falling short of a standard of perfection? Such awareness seems necessary: someone who was unaware of any shortcomings or deficiencies could not be humble. Whatever virtues God possesses, humility is not one of them. We also acknowledge that an awareness of a gap between achievement and aspiration may help to *keep* us humble, but they are not sufficient to *instill* humility. Although recognition of imperfection is

³ This thought should be broadened to include non-moral standards of excellence.

necessary for humility, it is not sufficient, since comparison of our own performance with a moral ideal, or the moral law, is compatible with an absence of humility. Such beliefs need not generate humility, for a number of reasons. First, there is a kind of obsessive concern with our own shortcomings, a continuous anxious self-examination, which can be provoked by comparison with a moral ideal. But a preoccupation with one's own moral development – indeed, a preoccupation of any kind with how one is doing – seems the wrong focus for humility. Humble people, as Kupfer rightly points out, do not “dwell on themselves” (251). Alternatively, contemplation of the heights of the moral law may simply lead to discouragement and despair. Kantians try to cheer us up by reminding us that we are all worthy of respect. But we have seen that the fact that one deserves recognition respect does not bear on whether one deserves appraisal respect, and so is not relevant to the issue of humility. Second, there is the reverse problem that recognition that one has a way to go is still compatible with a degree of arrogance or over-weening pride. In any journey one can be aware, not only that one has not yet arrived, but that one has already come some distance. If the first thought might support humility, the second might generate Pharisaic pride. In Kupfer's discussion of the film *Chariots of Fire*, whose hero Liddell refuses to take part in an Olympic heat on a Sunday for religious reasons, Kupfer claims that “Liddell must realize that the moral gap between himself and the British Olympic officials is not nearly so great as the difference between himself and spiritual perfection”. But not only is it unclear how we measure the size of a moral gap, we also have to deal with the fact that such realisations are compatible with a defensive moral smugness (“I may not be a perfectly good person, but at least I don't go round doing *that*.”) Is the moral cup half-empty, or half-full? Whichever way it is taken to be, it does not guarantee humility.

All the accounts we have so far looked at view humility as either constituted by, or at least grounded in, some belief the agent has about her level of attainment with respect to some comparator. All such accounts suffer from the same defect. Whether the agent rates herself highly or lowly, and whether her belief is accurate or not, her belief will be compatible with a range of different attitudes to her self-rating, not all of which will typify humility. So it looks as if we need to supplement the account of humility in terms of the agent's self-beliefs with some extra condition about her attitude to, or focus on, those truths about herself. To be humble will turn out to be a matter of orientation. The focus of the humble person is not on herself, her progress, or her status, but elsewhere. This is not, of course, a new thought. A theme of Kupfer's paper is that the humble are disposed not to dwell on themselves. Schueler claims that modest people do not care whether others are impressed by their accomplishments. Ridge argues that the modest person is “disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments ‘for the right reasons’”, which are (1) “the person must not care too much about how she is esteemed for her accomplishments and (2) she must care *enough* that people not overestimate her accomplishments, or her responsibility for them”.⁴

⁴ We do not think this talk of not caring entirely felicitous. Better, perhaps, to say that the humble person does not seek praise, nor does she think it something owed to her.

As Schueler points out, not caring whether people are impressed by you for your accomplishments (which is humility) is different from not caring how your accomplishments appear to people or are evaluated by people. A modest person might well care about how her accomplishments are evaluated, since she might care a lot that people see how important it is to find a cure for AIDS (which is what she's just done). That's different from caring about whether people are impressed by *her* for discovering the cure for AIDS. And, finally, as Ridge points out, it is not sufficient for modesty that one does not care whether actual people are impressed by your accomplishments, because you might, like the great-souled man, despise your fellow-man. It means not caring whether people whose judgments you respect are impressed.

If some view of this type is correct, as we think it is, then it is hard to see how comparing oneself to some standard can enable one to be humble since, as we have seen, one's response to what one discovers might be incompatible with humility. Rather, matters are the opposite way round. One will have first to be humble in order to have the appropriate response to reflections on one's ranking. Grenberg rightly sees this in the case of self-other comparison of which she says that it is not "an appropriate basis for humility, because humility is necessary in order to engage in self-other comparison productively". What we have been suggesting is that this problem also infects accounts that appeal to comparison with a moral ideal.

VI

Similar difficulties beset other attempts to delineate reflections that might lead to humility. Kupfer offers a complex account in which there are four dimensions of a "broader *moral* perspective in which humility is embedded" (250). In addition to comparing your own achievements with your moral ideal there are: radical dependence; moral comparison with others; objective valuation of things in the world. It is, unfortunately, unclear as to the precise role of this moral perspective in fostering humility. Sometimes Kupfer seems to imply that adoption of such a perspective actually constitutes humility, but in other places it seems that the role of this perspective is only to "capture basic ways in which we can and do develop greater humility". At yet other points, however, he seems to be making the even weaker claim that the explanatory relationship actually runs in the reverse direction: that is, one who is already humble will tend to view the world through the four dimensions of the moral perspective of humility (see first sentence of Sect IV, p. 256). With that last claim we have no quarrel. What we wish to argue is that reflection along these dimensions may be insufficient to *generate* humility since, unless one was already appropriately orientated, one could respond to such reflection in ways that are definitely not humble. We are, both Kupfer and Grenberg claim, radically dependent for our achievements on both luck, and the help of others. While this reflection might help us to avoid over-estimating our achievements, or at least our part in them, it need not lead to humility. For you

could still boast about the parts of one's triumphs that were entirely due to you. Moreover, people do feel proud of, and even arrogant about, things that are entirely out of their control – their lineage being an obvious example. Toad, in *Wind in the Willows*, is vainglorious about all his exploits, and boasts about his luck. We have already seen that moral comparison with others is no guarantee of humility. Finally, even the realization that there are things in the world that are valuable apart from ourselves may not do the trick. After all, no one but a madman would deny that. And that recognition may simply lead back to self. "The Revolution is glorious – but so is my part in it." "These mountains are sublime – how impressive it is of me to fully appreciate what others miss."

To sum up. We agree that the humble person's focus is not on her own achievements (or more accurately, on her role in those achievements) but elsewhere. Because humility involves one particular orientation towards the facts when other orientations are both possible and seductive, no reflection on the facts alone is sufficient to generate humility. The fundamental orientation of humility has already to be present in order for one to have the appropriate response to the facts.

If this thought about orientation is correct, then the temptation that humility resists is not the temptation to over-estimate our own achievements, a temptation which could perhaps be fended off by consideration of the relevant facts of the matter. Rather, it's the temptation to be self-absorbed, to have an orientation towards the facts in which the self and its needs and concerns are central to how one sees and reflects on the world. Over-estimating our own achievements is not in itself very important - why should it be any more important than over-estimating the achievements of others? By itself, this is just a failure of knowledge, which isn't such a big deal. So the view that humility requires correct self-assessment and the resisting of temptation to overestimate the self has something question-begging about it. It assumes that over-estimating the self is the important thing to be avoided, but that's because it assumes that such over-estimation is part of self-absorption. Sometimes it is, of course. But a person with humility might overestimate her own capacities without this being particularly vicious, so long as her orientation is towards others, and not the self. And where the over-estimation is indeed part of self-absorption, it's the self-absorption that precludes humility, not the over-estimation per se.⁵

Most humble or modest people do, of course, underestimate their own achievements. Given their lack of self-absorption, this may be understandable but, again, it is no big deal. Such underestimation is not only not necessary but it is not, we think, what makes the humble person admirable. At best, it is a rather charming quirk (provided it is not carried to excess.) And, as we have insisted, it is certainly not required in order for one to be humble.

⁵ Self-absorption can lead to arrogance. But it can also lead to self-denigration and self-loathing, depending on what one (takes oneself) to find in the self. Humility could be seen as an antidote to both vices.

VII

We turn finally to a very distinctive, though strangely neglected, feature of humility, which is its asymmetry with respect to the achievements of others. On the various accounts of humility which we've considered, the humble person either doesn't know how good her achievements are; or if she knows, she puts them into perspective with respect to some higher standard; or alternatively she doesn't focus on her own achievements, great though they may be, since she isn't concerned with her own status. But, whatever attitude to herself such an account prescribes, she doesn't take the same attitude to the achievements of others. The humble person does not go around pointing out that the achievements of others are not as good as they're cracked up to be, or that they're largely a matter of luck, or that compared to the demands of moral or other ideals they're pretty small beer. On the contrary, she gives others their due, and perhaps a bit more – she's typically generous towards the achievements of others, and is appropriately impressed by the qualities of character needed to produce such achievements.

This asymmetrical feature of humility is not a contentious one – we routinely expect the humble person to be appreciative of others' accomplishments. The person who rates her own achievements low, and the achievements of others equally low, is not humble but misanthropic (though it's worth noting that there are also forms of misanthropy which involve rating others low but the self high – I'm ok, you're not ok, so to speak).⁶ The person who rates her own achievements high, and those of others high, is optimistic about human achievements in general, which may well be a nice way to be, but doesn't amount to humility. In humility, there is a marked difference between the attitude taken to the self, and that taken to others. And this difference raises three questions: how is the asymmetry to be accounted for; what implications does it have for the various accounts of humility we've looked at so far; and in what ways (if any) does it help us to see why humility is a form of excellence, and desirable from the first person point of view as well as from the third?

In trying to account for this asymmetry, it's worth remembering that other asymmetries are also present in morality, most obviously in supererogation, where we think that people are allowed to make extra sacrifices for the sake of others, and are allowed to discount the cost of so doing, although they are not allowed to demand that others make similar sacrifices, and others are not allowed to discount the cost to the person who makes the sacrifice. This looks like the kind of structure that would fit with humility, where the humble person is allowed to, and does, discount the reward of praise due to her achievements, but others may not discount it for her, nor she for others. Similarly the humble

⁶ It has been put to us that a humble person might be focused on things other than the achievements of others and so need not be appreciative of them. But, in our view, she would not be denigratory, and a lack of appreciation of the achievements of others when such appreciation would be appropriate would seem to tell against her alleged humility.

person may legitimately play down her own achievements, but not those of others.

Lest such asymmetries seem doubtful because exceptional, we draw attention to other partners in crime. Another area of morality in which there are marked asymmetries are duties of special obligation. Here the agent has duties to some people (her patients, if she's a nurse or doctor, her students if she's a teacher, and so forth) but not to similar others, or at the very least, she has fewer and less demanding duties towards those similar others. The claims others have on us rest on the special relationships in which we stand to them. The point we want to make here is that the nature of the relationship shapes what an appropriate attitude or orientation to the other will look like. Take concern, for example. The love and concern I offer my child is different in kind from that which I can give to others – for a start, I'm bound up with my child's flourishing in a way I'm not with others. In fact, if I offered that kind of concern to others it might be quite objectionable. Think also of the interest that lovers show to each other – it isn't just that they have some, but less, interest to offer to others, it's also that the kind of interest they have is appropriate only between lovers. The kind of interest and concern a therapist offers her patients is very different from that which she can offer her friends, who might in fact strongly object to being treated therapeutically by a friend

Here the asymmetry is not, as in the case of supererogation, between the treatment of self and others, but between the treatment of some others and yet other others. But that does not affect the point of the analogy, for we stand in a relationship to ourselves that we do not stand in to others, and this affects what responses to our own achievements are appropriate. The admiration which the humble person (and the rest of us too, let's hope) gladly offers to those who deserve it is morally quite different from the admiration which those of us who lack the virtue of humility are inclined to bestow upon our own selves on account of our various accomplishments. Self-admiration is not the same kind of phenomenon as admiration for others: for a start, it's almost inseparable from the temptation to over-estimate the self's value, and become too absorbed in its needs and demands. (Note how different over-estimation of the value of the self is from the much less malign over-estimation of its achievements.) Admiration for others is unconnected with such temptations, which is one reason why a person may safely dwell on the achievements of others where she may not safely dwell on her own achievements. And for each of us, the temptation to become absorbed in self-love is one which we have special reason to resist, since it's our own temptation, and threatens us in a way in which the temptations of others do not. Analogously, although my own pain is no more or less important than the pain of any other person, nonetheless I have an extra reason to avoid my own pain which no-one else has. Similarly I have an extra reason to resist my own temptations which no-one else has, even though we all have reason to reduce the amount of temptation in the world, just as we have reason to reduce the amount of pain in the world. The presence of these agent-neutral reasons does

not rule out the presence of agent-relative ones also. The need to resist the temptations of self-absorption can account for the asymmetrical nature of humility, its lack of concern for the status of the self and its consequent focus on the value of others.

The above reflections might be taken to show, not that self-admiration is *essentially* different from admiring others, but that self-admiration in frail humans is only too likely to degenerate into something both nasty and unlike admiration of others. Perhaps angels can admire both their own achievements and excellences, and those of others, in similar fashion while avoiding the pitfalls to which we have drawn attention. We are not sure that this is possible. When others admire us, we can, and usually should, be pleased and grateful. Being pleased and grateful because I admire myself makes little, if any, sense. I can be both proud of and humbled by public recognition of my achievements. But I can be neither proud of, nor humbled by, my recognition of my own achievements.

So the asymmetrical aspect of humility is not unique to it, nor is it morally incomprehensible. How does it impinge on the accounts of humility which we have been considering? What it seems to do is to rule out many of the explanations and/or justifications for humility provided by these accounts. So, for example, if we think that what grounds humility is the comparison between one's own achievements, however high, and the moral law, then the asymmetrical aspect of humility is going to seem inexplicable. If *my* actions are put into proper perspective by comparison with the moral law, then so too are *yours*, and I have no more reason to admire yours than to admire my own. If my humility about my own achievements is based on a grasp of my radical dependence on others and on contingency, then I will also grasp the radical dependence of your actions, and indeed everyone's, and will have no more reason to praise others than to praise myself. In fact any general explanation offered for why we should embrace humility seems to fall foul of this asymmetry problem, just so long as we think of such explanations as providing neutral reasons for withholding admiration from human achievements. But once we see that humility involves the rejection of self-admiration, seen as a different kind of phenomenon than admiration for others, then we can look for reasons for that rejection which do not go through to admiration for others, and such reasons will have to do with avoiding the temptation to succumb to the self-love which blinds us to the existence of other loci of value in the world. This kind of reason shows us why the central feature of humility is not the presence of certain beliefs about the self, but rather the presence of an attitude towards the self which precludes those beliefs, or their content, from being the most salient feature of the situation.

It might be argued that if we know that something's admirable, then how can we not admire it, even if it's our own achievement? And if that's right, then for humble persons to withhold admiration from themselves while granting it to others will require them to be ignorant of their own achievements. So this account in terms of the distinctive attitude of the humble person will fall foul of

just the problems about ignorance which undermined the account of humility in terms of beliefs. But there is an obvious reply to this objection. Consider my knowledge that a particular Nazi was personally very kind to children and animals. That kind of behaviour is admirable, I don't deny that. But I don't pause and admire, since other things take precedence, and perhaps even silence the impulse to admiration. Similarly, in the case of a great beneficiary of mine, I may know that he's done things which are despicable, but I don't spend time despising them, since there are other features about him which I prefer to concentrate on, out of gratitude. (The person who focuses on his beneficiary's vices is more likely to be trying to get rid of the burden of debt than to honestly give discredit where discredit is due.)

Finally, what is the value of humility from the first-person point of view – what's in it for the humble person, so to speak? There are (at least) two benefits which the humble person can be seen to derive from her humility. Firstly, she is released from the prison of constant concern about her status, about how she's doing in comparison to others. She doesn't need to feel that grinding anxiety about the adequacy of her performance, her achievements, her character, her appearance, that fills so much of most people's lives. The release from this pre-occupation is liberation indeed.⁷ And secondly, she is free to admire openheartedly the achievements and excellences of others without feeling diminished by them, since she doesn't have to keep comparing them with herself at all. Her focus is elsewhere, away from the mirror; and she no longer needs to feel, in Gore Vidal's beautifully accurate formulation, that it is not enough to succeed, others must fail. The free and generous admiration which the humble person is able to offer to others, while not the same as love, has at least the makings of love in it. So humility provides liberation from concerns about status, and puts the humble person in the way of feeling love for her fellows. Both of these are great goods; so humility, construed in this way, can be seen to be of value to its possessor.

VIII

We're accustomed to thinking of humility as appearing in humble (so to speak) circumstances. But sometimes it can be found in the most dramatic ones, in contexts of great heroism and self-sacrifice. Consider the words of a person who acted with true heroism, in the face of the most deadly dangers:

The term hero irritates me greatly. The opposite is true. I continue to have pangs of conscience that I did so little. Every child saved with my help and the help of all the wonderful secret messengers, who today are no longer living, is the justification of my existence on this Earth, and not a title to glory. (Irena Sendlerowa)

⁷ It might be thought that humility isn't necessary for this liberation, since the megalopsuchos has this freedom too. We're not entirely convinced that the megalopsuchos is really so free from concerns about status. But even if he is, the second good which humility brings will not be available to him, as we shall see.

This quotation, from a Pole who saved Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto at enormous personal risk (she was tortured by the Gestapo) is characteristic of the humble person. Note the following features:

- 1 The rejection of the idea that her actions should be glorified
- 2 The asymmetry: at the same time she is rejecting praise for herself, she praises the other people in the organization as “wonderful”.
- 3 The downgrading of her own achievements (“I did so little”) We regard the first two as central, and have tried to explain them. The third is typical though not, in our view, essential.

The hero who has the virtue of humility won't necessarily say that she did so little. What she won't be saying is that she did so much. Not because this isn't true, but because that's not where her focus lies. She looks outward, away from the self and from the seductive mirror. It's true that some heroes do not have this virtue, and are nonetheless heroic. But if we have to choose between the self-admiring megalopsuchic hero on the one hand, and Irena Sendlerowa on the other, it's not unreasonable, so we have tried to argue, to think that Sendlerowa is better, and also better-off.