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THE PARADOX OF  
*Humility*

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The concept of humility never particularly animated me. I saw it as a kind of diminishment of being, a somewhat powerless and destructive temptation, even complacent. An artificial injunction, a fear of living, an absence of risk, a harmful virtue opposed to the very idea of existing. Humility seemed to me like a form of renunciation, a way of making oneself small in a world that, on the contrary, demands boldness and affirmation. I perceived it as a hindrance to personal growth, a barrier to creativity and authentic expression.

Humility appeared as a way of evading self-assertion, a disguise for those who refused to engage in the struggle, a moral ruse intended to justify passivity and self-effacement. Why bow down, why submit, when existence itself calls for expansion, creation, taking up space, and exercising one's power of being? Confronting the discourses justifying this virtue, I sensed a contradiction: how could one, by claiming to erase oneself, truly act? By striving to disappear, didn't one end up becoming insignificant, devoid of any real substance? Humility seemed more like surrender than fulfillment, a way of making oneself invisible in a world that, on the contrary, demands exposure without fear or regret. I saw it as a hindrance to flourishing, a barrier to creativity and self-expression.

Yet, over time and through careful reflection, I began to glimpse another facet of humility: not as a denial of self, but as a form of lucidity. Perhaps humility is not merely a negation, but a kind of intelligence, a more subtle way of inhabiting the world. Authentic humility does not diminish; it opens. Perhaps it is not a refusal to be, but another way of being fully, without arrogance or illusion. It allows one to recognize our limits without losing oneself, to welcome others without self-denial, and to engage with the world with a certain lightness. Perhaps humility, far from being a weakness, is a discreet force

that invites us to wholly exist, without arrogance, but also without apprehension. To the extent that this humility is not a conventional formalism or socially imposed, otherwise it becomes empty and existentially castrating.

# Chapter I

## What is humility?

### *Definition*

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Humility is the quality of having a modest and conscious view of one's own importance, recognizing both personal limitations and strengths, which implies being free from excessive pride or arrogance. It involves being grounded in reality, acknowledging one's dependence on others or higher powers, maintaining openness to learning, caring about the development and perspectives of others, acknowledging their legitimacy and value. It is a measured virtue that combines confidence with modesty, strength with self-awareness, and service with respect for others. It allows individuals to act authentically and effectively while fostering genuine connections and understanding.

The key aspects of humility are the following.

**Self-awareness** Understanding and accepting one's strengths, weaknesses, and role within a larger context, neither overestimating nor underestimating one's abilities.

**Modesty** Avoiding excessive pride or the need to seek validation or recognition, by letting actions and character speak louder than self-promotion.

**Appreciation for others** Valuing the opinions, contributions, and worth of others, listening with openness and engaging without a sense of superiority, what is commonly called respect, when it is not a formal attitude.

**Willingness to Learn** Being open to feedback, correction, and new knowledge, recognizing that personal growth generally comes through accepting one's limitations.

**Service-Orientation** Placing others' needs or the collective good above self-interest, seeing leadership or influence as an opportunity to serve rather than dominate.

**Detachment** Freedom from the need for praise, power, or control, focusing on the greater good rather than personal gain.

We should distinguish it from opposite ideas which might look similar.

**False modesty** Pretending to downplay oneself for the sake of appearing humble.

**Self-abasement** Denying one's worth, value, or potential in a way that leads to passivity or self-neglect.

**Timidity** Lacking confidence, audacity or assertiveness out of fear or insecurity.

At its core, humility is not about self-deprecation or low self-esteem; rather, it is about being grounded, self-aware, and free from excessive pride or self-centeredness. It allows for a reasonable perspective where one's value is understood in relation to others, fostering empathy, respect, and a genuine desire to contribute positively without seeking undue recognition. Humility is the quality of having a modest or accurate view of oneself, including one's abilities, importance, and limitations. It involves recognizing and accepting one's place in a larger context without seeking to elevate oneself above others. Humility is marked by an openness to learning from others, a willingness to acknowledge mistakes, and a tendency to put the needs or contributions of others on equal footing with one's own.

#### *cultural differences*

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The concept of humility is valued across many cultures, though it is expressed and emphasized differently.

Here are a few cultural examples of these differences, somewhat specifying the concept.

**Buddhism** In many Buddhist-influenced societies, humility is considered essential for spiritual growth. The teaching of anatta (non-self) and the focus on reducing ego and attachment, realizing the impermanence of self and all things, encourage individuals to let go of self-centeredness and embrace humility. This is often expressed in reverence for others, respect for teachers and elders, and the importance of compassion, wisdom and service.



**Japan** Humility is a core value in Japanese society, often expressed through modesty, self-restraint, and respect for others. The Japanese concept of *kenkyo* refers to self-effacement and not drawing attention to oneself. This approach to humility is deeply ingrained in social interactions, work environments, and the emphasis on harmony, where placing oneself above others or even singularizing oneself is discouraged.

In the Shinto tradition, humility is tied to the concept of purity and harmony. It involves showing reverence for the *kami* (spirits or deities), nature, and the community. It is expressed through rituals, respect for traditions, and a deep sense of gratitude for the blessings of life. This humility is not self-effacing but a recognition of the interconnectedness of all things and one's place within the natural and spiritual order.

In Zen Buddhism, humility is intertwined with the practice of mindfulness and the dissolution of ego. It emphasizes simplicity, detachment from material concerns, and acceptance of the present moment. It implies respect for the interconnectedness of all beings.

**China** Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on humility, respect, and modesty. Confucian teachings emphasize the importance of humility in achieving harmony within society and in personal conduct. It is also embedded in interpersonal interactions, where it is considered polite to downplay one's achievements, minimize oneself, and express respect for others. It involves recognizing one's limitations and showing deference to elders, teachers, and societal hierarchies. It is a demonstration of self-awareness and the ability to adapt one's behavior to maintain harmonious rela-

tionships. It is a sign of moral development, by cultivating virtues like righteousness and propriety.

In Taoism, humility is rooted in the principle of “wu wei” (non-action or effortless action), by yielding to the natural flow of the Tao, cosmic and personal. It is seen as a strength, like water that flows gently but can overcome the hardest rock. It involves letting go of personal ambitions, pride, and control, in order to align oneself with the natural order and laboring in this sense, working on one’s own limits.

**India** In India, humility is highly valued, especially in religious and spiritual contexts. Hindu and Jain philosophies emphasize humility as an aspect of self-control and respect for all living beings. Showing respect to elders, teachers, and spiritual guides is important, and this respect for hierarchy and tradition reinforces humility as a valued trait. In Hinduism, humility is closely linked to self-discipline and devotion. It involves recognizing the self (atman) as part of the divine whole and surrendering the ego to the higher power (Brahman). It manifests as respect for others, non-violence, and a willingness to learn.

**Islam** Humility is a significant virtue in many Muslim cultures, where it is seen as part of submission to Allah’s will and acknowledgment of His greatness. Islamic teachings encourage humility before God and in interactions with others. The emphasis on charity, helping the poor, and showing kindness to others prioritize justice and compassion, and a rejection of arrogance or pride reflects a commitment to humility.

**Indigenous Cultures** In many Indigenous cultures, humility is valued as a way of recognizing one's place in the interconnected web of life. Respect for nature, community, and ancestors includes an understanding that we are not superior to other beings. Humility is a recognition of one's connection to the earth, community, and ancestors. In native American traditions, it is seen as a respect for the natural world and the wisdom of the elders. It involves living in harmony with nature, acknowledging one's dependence on it, and understanding that human life is a small part of a greater whole. In African traditional religions, humility centers around communal living, respect for elders, and acknowledgment of one's role within a larger network of relationships. It is linked to virtues like gratitude and service to others.

**Judaism** Humility involves recognizing one's abilities as gifts from God and using them to serve others, not for self-aggrandizement. It is expressed in gratitude, acknowledging one's dependence on God and the contributions of others. Humility balances self-worth and modesty, ensuring that individuals neither overestimate nor underestimate their own value.

**Humanism** Humility is understood as the recognition of the limits of human knowledge and the value of diverse perspectives. It emphasizes openness to learning, acknowledging mistakes, and valuing the contributions of others in collective progress.

**Existentialism** Some existentialist thinkers view humility as accepting the absurdity and limitations of human existence without falling into despair. It involves embracing life authentically, recognizing the freedom to create meaning despite the lack of inherent purpose.

**Stoicism** Humility is part of understanding one's place within the cosmos, distinguishing what is within and beyond one's control. It revolves around self-awareness, recognizing the vastness of the universe, and understanding the limitations of human power. It is deeply rooted in the core principles of accepting reality and aligning oneself with the natural order, as humans are a tiny part of the vast cosmos, governed by the logos, universal reason or order. Realizing this cosmic perspective fosters humility by emphasizing that our individual desires, struggles and needs are minuscule in the grand scheme of things, and pursuing virtue is a lifelong journey. Stoicism warns against the dangers of arrogance, which blinds individuals to their limitations and disrupts their harmony with the world, as we are fallible, prone to error, and always in need of improvement. It emphasizes the importance of learning from others, acknowledging that wisdom is not an innate possession but a continual pursuit. Stoics believe that humans are social animals, designed to live in harmony with others and contribute to the collective good, prioritizing the needs of the community over selfish ambitions, recognizing that we are all interconnected. We should constantly remind ourselves of our mortality, acknowledging the fleeting nature of our life.

Thus, most cultures value humility, but they practice it in their unique way that aligns with their religious, philosophical, and social principles. Humility is a universal virtue, but how it is cultivated and expressed can vary widely depending on beliefs and norms. While the core of humility generally involves self-awareness, openness, and acknowledgment of limitations, each culture and philosophy adds its own unique emphasis. Whether through submission to a higher power, alignment with nature, or fostering social harmony, humility remains a universal virtue with diverse expressions. For example, in

Christianity, humility is aimed at submission to God and achieving salvation, while in Confucianism, humility is intended to promote social harmony. The expression of humility in Christianity often emphasizes love for all people, whereas in Confucianism, it is more about adherence to social rules and norms. Although both forms of humility contribute to maintaining stable social and political structures, their fundamental purposes and nature differ.

*The case of christianity*

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Humility is a central virtue in Christianity, encouraged in teachings like "the meek shall inherit the earth" and through the example of Jesus, portrayed as a figure of compassion, modesty, and service. However, in practice, the degree to which humility is emphasized or lived out can vary widely depending on historical, denominational, and cultural contexts within Christian societies.

Christian humility mainly centers on recognizing one's dependence on God, acknowledging that human strength and wisdom are limited in comparison to divine wisdom. This humility before God is the pathway to spiritual growth, and there is a strong focus on individual salvation, in contrast to some other cultures we described. In Christian Western societies, historical shifts, such as the Renaissance, Enlightenment or the industrial revolutions, brought a focus on individualism, progress, and personal achievement. These shifts can somewhat conflict with humility, especially in competitive or highly individualistic environments. While the core Christian message emphasizes humility, modern cultural factors have at times shaped Christian expressions away from humility in favor of self-expression or assertiveness.

In Christian traditions where humility is actively practiced, it is expressed through service to others, charity, and a commitment to social justice. Monastic traditions, for example, emphasize humility through community living and renunciation of personal desires. Christian humility often involves the idea of “servant leadership”, leading by example and serving others. Different Christian denominations emphasize humility to varying extents. For example, Catholic orders, like the Franciscans, emphasize poverty, simplicity, and humility as a way of life. In contrast, certain Protestant denominations place a higher value on individual prosperity, success and personal salvation, which can shift focus away from humility. Overall, Christian culture is not necessarily less prone to humility, but it is expressed differently based on theological beliefs, social context, and cultural influences. At its core, humility remains a valued virtue in Christianity, but how it is embodied can differ widely across Christian communities and may not always align with more community-oriented, self-effacing forms of humility found in some other cultures.

In Christian thought, humility doesn’t necessarily equate to being self-effacing, which suggests minimizing oneself, perhaps to the point of diminishing one’s value or agency. While some Christian traditions do emphasize humility as a form of self-restraint or modesty, the ideal Christian humility is often about maintaining a balanced self-perception, rather than erasing or downplaying oneself.

Here are some reasons why the concept of humility in Christian culture may not always align with self-effacement.

**Affirmation of Self-Worth** Christianity teaches that every person has inherent worth and dignity as a creation of God. This perspective encourages a balanced self-view, a temperate self-conception, rather than denying one's value or unique abilities. Humility is seen as recognizing that one's talents and strengths are gifts, not sources of pride, rather than denying or minimizing these qualities.

**Service and Strength** Christian humility often involves serving others with strength and compassion, embodying an idea of "servant leadership." In this model, humility is not about fading into the background but instead about leading through service, compassion, and respect for others. This type of humility doesn't require one to be self-effacing; it encourages action, responsibility, and contribution to the community.

**Self-Reflection** Christian humility is ideally rooted in honest self-assessment, recognizing both strengths and limitations, while staying open to improvement. This differs from self-effacement, which can lean toward self-deprecation, undervaluing one's contributions, or even denying our own reality as a subject or agent.

**Transcendence** Christian humility primarily means acknowledging one's reliance on God, which doesn't necessitate downplaying oneself but rather placing oneself within a larger, divine context. Humility comes from understanding that one's abilities and life have meaning within a relationship with God, in our capacity to receive and accept

the divine power, rather than reducing oneself in value. Even if certain traditions heavily insist on lowering the self and self-abasement.

Thus Christian humility involves modesty and self-restraint without requiring self-effacement. It encourages a “healthy” self-concept, where one’s worth is acknowledged but understood within the broader perspective of faith, community, and service.

### *Humility and Humanity*

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The terms “human” and “humility” share a related etymology, both stemming from the Latin word *humus*, which means “earth” or “ground.” This origin suggests a connection between being “grounded” or “down to earth” and the human experience.

**Humility:** derived from the Latin *humilitas*, meaning “lowness” or “meekness,” which itself comes from *humus*. The term suggests being close to the earth in a metaphorical sense, implying modesty, groundedness, and an absence of arrogance.

**Human:** Also derived from *humus*, it suggests that humans are “of the earth” or “earthly beings.” This reflects the ancient view of humanity’s close relationship with the earth and the natural world.

The shared etymology underscores a symbolic link, as humility involves recognizing our limitations, rootedness, and place within the larger order, much like the idea of humanity being “of the earth.” It symbolizes modesty, the recognition of one’s smallness or limitations and interdependence in the grand scheme of things. Humility thus involves recognizing that we, as humans, are not infinite, self-sufficient beings but are instead dependent on the earth, on others, and on forces beyond our control. This awareness keeps us “grounded” in reality, much like humanity’s existence is tied to the physical world.



The earth is often seen as a symbol of nourishment, stability, and life, but also of decay and mortality. Similarly, humility is a virtue that embraces both the strengths and vulnerabilities of being human. Humans are literally made from the earth, our physical bodies come from the elements of the natural world, as described in many creation myths, and by science. Recognizing this connection fosters humility by reminding us of our fragility and dependence on the environment. Humanity's survival and flourishing depend on the earth's resources, emphasizing our inherent vulnerability and the need to act responsibly and respectfully toward the planet. This interdependence is mirrored in humility, which acknowledges that no individual or species exists in isolation.

Both humility and humanity involve acknowledging limits, of knowledge, power, and control. Just as humanity is bound by the physical laws of nature, humility accepts that we are not omnipotent or all-knowing. Humility reflects an understanding that we are part of something greater, whether it is nature, society, or the cosmos. Similarly, humanity's "of the earth" essence positions us within a broader ecological and existential framework. Humility encourages stepping away from ego-driven pursuits and embracing a perspective that values connection over domination. This aligns with the idea of humanity as inherently communal and interdependent, "man as social being", as coined by Aristotle. Embracing humility can foster a healthier relationship with the earth, acknowledging our role as stewards rather than masters of the natural world. Thus, recognizing our "earthiness" promotes environmental awareness and sustainable living. The connection between humility and humanity is also evident in the shared awareness of mortality, in the principle of finitude. To be human is to be finite, mortal, and subject to decay, just like

all things of the earth. This awareness encourages humility, as it reminds us of our shared vulnerability and impermanence.

But of course, this is opposed to another dimension of human nature, which can be called Promethean, where man makes himself equal to the “gods”, where he transgresses the established order, a conflictual dimension that lies at the heart of our history and our actions.

## Chapter II

# The paradox of humility

*A contradictory quality*

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The concept of humility can be seen as a paradox because it combines two seemingly opposing qualities: being “lowly”, acknowledging one’s limitations and insignificance, and being “great”, demonstrating strength, wisdom, and moral clarity. This paradox arises because true humility requires self-awareness and confidence, a positive quality, and not self-abasement or weakness. Humility involves acknowledging one’s limitations, ignorance, or dependence on others. This includes accepting that we are not all-powerful, infallible, or central to everything. It entails downplaying one’s own successes, refraining from boasting, and recognizing that personal achievements often rely on external factors like support from others or favorable circumstances. It expresses itself through prioritizing others’ needs, listening, and showing respect, even when it means setting aside personal pride or self-image.

True humility reflects confidence and self-mastery. It takes inner strength to accept one's flaws, listen to criticism, and remain open to learning without being defensive. Humility is in this sense associated with wisdom and integrity. Great leaders and thinkers who practice humility can inspire others because they are grounded, unpretentious, and focused on collective goals rather than personal gain. Humility frees a person from the constant need for validation or superiority. This inner freedom can empower people to act more decisively and authentically. Thus such humble people command admiration.

Humility appears paradoxical because it involves lowering oneself outwardly while achieving inner greatness. "The lower you go, the higher you rise", is a principle that is encountered in many spiritual contexts. By embracing one's limitations and serving others, a humble person achieves a form of moral and social greatness that is often more enduring and respected than outward displays of power or arrogance. Acknowledging weaknesses or failures is a hallmark of humility, but this vulnerability demonstrates courage and authenticity, which are strengths in themselves. Humility aligns with the idea that greatness is not found in domination but in serving others. Figures like Jesus, Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela exemplify this paradox, achieving immense influence through self-sacrifice and modesty.

Humility must avoid two extremes to maintain its paradoxical balance. False humility, as pretending to be humble while secretly seeking recognition or validation undermines true humility. This is a subtle form of pride and the disguise of a dishonest calculation. And self-abasement, as mistaking humility for self-neglect or believing one is unworthy leads to a diminished sense of self, which is counterproductive. True humility does not deny one's value; it simply reframes it in relation to others and the larger picture.

To embody the paradox of humility, one must be self-aware, recognizing both strengths and weaknesses without exaggerating either. It implies to be grounded, to remain focused on a wider reality, on a larger purpose or a collective good, rather than on personal value and glory. One should be open, to listen to others, to accept criticism, in order to learn without defensiveness. One can serve others and act decisively, knowing that humility is opposite to passivity and self-denial. In essence, humility's paradox lies in its ability to elevate us by lowering us, to make us stronger by embracing vulnerability, and to grant us greatness through service and modesty. True humility reconciles these opposites, creating a balanced and deeply respected way of being, a very rare occurrence.

*impossible humility*

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As a provocative hypothesis, we would like to propose the idea that humility, as an ideal, is a rather impossible challenge. Let us examine diverse reasons justifying this claim, which implies that there are no truly humble people, or it is a very rare occurrence.

First of all, true humility, like all moral principles, may be considered an unreachable ideal. Human nature, which contains self-interest, pride, and diverse psychological needs, makes real humility nearly impossible to attain. Even acts that appear humble involve self-interest, as we can take pride and pleasure in our "humility" or the recognition we receive for it. This paradox suggests that total humility is rarely genuine. But because of our own insecurity and need for recognition, we seek validation for our good actions, even if unconsciously. This means that humility is intertwined with a need for external approval or self-affirmation, compromising true humility.

Humility goes against natural tendencies, as most societies teach, in one way or another, values of achievement and individual pride, social recognition, which subtly discourages humility as a personal trait. This makes true humility difficult to sustain, as cultural conditioning promotes pride in accomplishments, and true humility would require total detachment from these influences. Naturally, in order to feel good, people tend to have a positive bias toward themselves. We prefer to think we are better or more moral than others. This bias can prevent us from reaching true humility, as we are easily blind to our own flaws. Furthermore, to think of oneself as humble is contradictory because self-reflection on humility implies a certain pride or self-valuation, which disrupts the nature of humility itself. Unless we presuppose that true humility is unconscious, a lawful consequence of the concept. If one receives admiration or acknowledgment for being humble, it may subtly reinforce pride, inducing a cycle where this humility becomes a virtue that enhances self-esteem, undermining “pure” humility.

Sometimes, people adopt a form of humility as a protective mechanism. By appearing humble, they might avoid criticism or reduce expectations others place on them. This humility is strategic, used as a way to manage social situations and deflect negative judgments, to prevent appearing arrogant or to sidestep envy, to avoid taking risks. This type of humility is more about self-protection than self-understanding. This defensive humility, strategically employed, lacks the purity of true humility. Some may adopt a humble demeanor as a way to influence others or win favor, for their own purposes. But of course, since they do look humble, we are tempted to conclude that they are humble.

True humility requires one to act without regard for how others perceive them. Ironically, social recognition and reputation, the recognition of humility, will impact the behavior of those intended to be humble. True humility is not preoccupied with how others perceive us, it just reflects an inner state of self-awareness and an honest assessment of one's strengths and limitations. It is grounded in a genuine sense of oneself. It arises from recognizing one's place within a broader context. In this way, true humility tends to be more self-contained, focusing on a personal alignment with reality rather than adjusting based on others' judgments. Paradoxically, others will perceive true humility as admirable, precisely because it isn't attempting to win their favor or approval. It has an authenticity that can resonate without being crafted to impress. But often, those who do not care about our approval or do not provide it are viewed as threatening, a situation that makes humility difficult.

Every human has inherent self-interest, which can taint humility. Completely putting aside one's needs and desires is rare and difficult, if not impossible, suggesting that "pure" humility is likely unattainable. We can anyhow argue that no human virtue, including humility, can be entirely authentic, as people's actions are based on complex motives that always involve self-interest, meaning "real humility" is implausible, just like "total morality". Even in acts of obvious humility, there are most likely hidden motivations that serve self-interest, making humility rare, if not impossible. True humility would require a complete lack of self-importance, yet being self-aware creates an inherent tendency to appreciate one's own identity and impact, which undermines humility. One can easily take pride in being humble, consciously or unconsciously. Once humility is recognized and valued internally, or externally, it becomes a source of pride, which contra-

dicts humility itself. Some even end up boasting about being humble, true or false, as a way of reinforcing and enhancing their discourse or their actions. Humans naturally seek validation from others. Even those who act humbly may seek approval or acknowledgment, which indicates a lack of true humility. Even the aspiration to become more humble implies self-focus and a goal-oriented mentality, which contradicts the selfless, ego-free nature of humility. Acting in a truly humble way would mean not thinking about oneself at all, even in a self-effacing way. However, this is nearly impossible, as even the humblest people tend to retain a certain pride in their selflessness.

Humility is often circumstantial. We can propose the idea that people are humble, until they can afford to be proud. It is all about wealth, power and opportunity. We are humble when we face some type of authority, when there is a power game. It seems that humble people are often forced by circumstances, but as soon as they can, with power, money or opportunity, they will stop being humble. A trap that will be quite difficult to avoid. This dynamic is rather common; it reflects a shift in priorities and self-perception that tends to accompany “newly found” power, wealth, or opportunity. Humility is often maintained when people lack the means or social position to assert themselves, possibly because they are more reliant on others or constrained by circumstances. But once they gain resources or influence, they tend to feel empowered to express themselves more openly, sometimes abandoning humility for smugness, pride, or even arrogance, as they now have the leverage to prioritize self-interest. This transition, that we have all observed at some point in certain persons, sometimes surprisingly, highlights how humility is often situational, a behavior shaped by external limitations, rather than deeply rooted in being.



# Chapter III

## Affects of humility

### *Emotions and feelings*

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Humility is associated with a range of emotions and feelings connected to self-awareness, connection to others, and a recognition of one's place in a larger context. These emotions have both individual and relational dimensions, as humility is not just about how we see ourselves but also about how we relate to others and the world around us. They can be both pleasant and painful.

As affects are often called emotions in an undifferentiated fashion, it seems useful to briefly describe the difference between emotion and feeling in this context.

In a general way, emotions are automatic, physiological responses triggered by external or internal stimuli. They are universal and rooted in the brain's limbic system. The emotions associated with humility could include awe, shame, or embarrassment, depending on the situation. For example, encountering someone who exemplifies greatness may trigger a feeling of awe, sparking a sense of humility. Similarly, recognizing a personal mistake could evoke shame, which

might lead to a humbler perspective. Emotions are immediate and reactive, often felt before they are fully processed by the conscious mind, and they often have physiological manifestations, like facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.

Feelings are the subjective, conscious interpretations of emotions. They emerge after the brain processes the initial emotional response. For example, a feeling of humility develops when we consciously reflect on our limitations, our interconnectedness with others, or the vastness of something greater than ourselves. For instance, the emotion of awe might translate into a feeling of humility when you reflect on your place in the universe. Similarly, shame might transform into humility when it is processed as a constructive understanding of one's flaws. Feelings are reflective and nuanced, shaped by personal experiences, beliefs, and interpretations.

Thus, an emotion is automatic, arising from a specific trigger. Feelings arise from reflection on the emotion, or its longer lasting effect, or they settle in over time, through life experience. Emotions are more intense but short-lived and immediate. Feelings are more durable and shaped or affected by thought processes. In humility, emotions act as a catalyst. The initial emotional response, like shame or awe, can lead to humility. Feelings represent the deeper, more sustained experience of humility after processing the emotion. For example, a student feels embarrassed (emotion) after realizing they made an error in their presentation. Through reflection, they develop a sense of humility (feeling), recognizing that everyone makes mistakes and that they can grow from the experience. In this case, feelings are the conscious awareness of underlying emotional states. Both types of affect play a role in shaping the complex experience of humility.

Feelings can as well be cognitively generated. They can emerge from thoughts, beliefs, or memories rather than immediate emotional triggers. For example, reflecting on past mistakes might evoke a feeling of humility without any current emotional event. It can derive as well from persistent mental states. Some feelings, like contentment or melancholy, may persist as underlying moods not tied to a specific emotional trigger. For example, a feeling of humility might arise through ongoing self-reflection or life experiences rather than an immediate emotion like embarrassment. It can as well be induced by cultural or philosophical activities. Feelings like awe or reverence can be cultivated through contemplation or intellectual reflection, independent of strong emotional events. For example, reading about the vastness of the universe or watching some astronomical video might evoke a feeling of wonder and humility in the face of the immensity of the universe, without necessarily provoking a strong emotional surge. Reading a book can slowly provoke a feeling of pleasure while we reflect on the fragility of human beings. Therefore emotion-driven feelings are triggered by physiological and automatic emotional responses, they are more reactive and tied to specific stimuli. While non emotion driven feelings arise from thought processes, memories, or reflective states. They may develop gradually and exist independently of immediate stimuli.

*positive and negative affects*

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Let us now establish a list of positive and negative affects connected to humility. But we will not specify if they are emotions or feelings, as both types can sometimes overlap. For example, shame may begin as an intense emotion but, over time, it can diminish in intensity and settle into a lingering feeling.

**Positive affects** They arise when humility fosters connection, openness, and growth, when we experience a sense of harmony with the feeling, between the world and ourselves.

**Gratitude** Humility often comes with a sense of gratitude, recognizing that personal achievements are often supported by others, assisted by external or transcendent factors. A humble person acknowledges their dependence on relationships, circumstances, or “superior” influence, fostering a sense of appreciation.

**Compassion** Humility helps individuals focus less on themselves and more on the needs of others. This can cultivate empathy and compassion, a pleasant feeling, enabling deeper connections with others and a genuine desire to help.

**Contentment** By letting go of pride and unrealistic expectations, humility allows for acceptance of one’s limitations, leading to inner peace and contentment.

**Awe** Recognizing one’s smallness in the face of the vast universe, a transcending reality, or larger systems can inspire awe, an emotion tied to humility. This is especially common in experiences related to nature, spirituality, or profound realizations about life and humanity.

**Belonging** By fostering mutual respect and connection, humility can evoke feelings of belonging and solidarity within groups or communities, or some transcendental reality.

**Trust** Humility fosters trust in relationships because it demonstrates authenticity, openness, and the absence of manipulative or self-serving motives, a strongly bonding mental state.

**Appreciation** Humility provides a sense of appreciation because it fosters an awareness of one's limitations and dependence on others or external factors. By recognizing that achievements, opportunities, and relationships are not solely self-made, humility allows individuals to value the contributions of others and the circumstances that shape their lives. This mindset helps to genuinely appreciate both the small and significant aspects of life, in opposition to ambition and greed.

**Oceanic feeling** Humility provides an enlargement of the soul by dissolving the boundaries of the self, allowing one to feel deeply connected to something greater, be it nature, humanity, or the divine. By letting go of self-centeredness, humility opens the mind to a sense of vastness, unity, and transcendence, evoking a profound awareness of being part of an infinite whole. In spiritual contexts, humility is tied to blissful reverence for a higher power or a greater truth, inspiring awe and submission to something beyond our understanding.

**Hope** Humility opens individuals to growth and improvement, fostering a sense of hope for change, learning, or reconciliation, even a sense of boundless providence.

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*Negative affects*

Humility does operate as a “pure” isolated psychological phenomenon. It provokes as well adverse reactions, it can be accompanied by problematic sensations. They arise when humility makes us con-

front a painful sense of limit and powerlessness, which can be rather challenging. As well, when humility is forced upon us by external circumstances or by a sense of internal obligation. It then comes at odds with our temperament. Here are some potential negative effects of humility on the psyche.

**Vulnerability** Humility requires openness to one's weaknesses and mistakes, which can evoke feelings of failure and imperfection. Admitting that one doesn't have all the answers or hold sufficient power can feel exposing, frustrating or depressing, although this feeling of weakness might be essential for personal growth.

**Shame** Humility can be accompanied by a sense of shame or discomfort about past mistakes, about our own impotence, visible to all or only to ourselves. Such a temporary feeling can lead to humility by fostering self-awareness and a desire to improve, but excessive shame can be counterproductive, as it induces self-deprecation.

**Guilt** Recognizing the impact of one's actions on others, our negligence or wrongdoings, can evoke guilt, which, in turn, may inspire humility and a commitment to act more responsibly in the future, to the extent this guilt does not overpower us.

**Humiliation** Sometimes, humility grows out of moments of humiliation or failure. These experiences can evoke emotions like sadness, regret, or embarrassment, but they also provide opportunities for reflection and growth. Humility is a positive, self-directed trait reflecting strength and self-control, when humiliation is a negative experience when conceived as inflicted externally, causing harm to one's dignity.

Humiliation can be induced by the blatant and painful visibility of our own defects.

**Anxiety** Humility requires embracing uncertainty and acknowledging what one does not know or cannot control, which can lead to anxiety about one's place in the world or fear of judgment by others. This is particularly pronounced when humility clashes with the desire for confidence or societal pressures to appear competent.

**Resentment** Recognizing one's limitations or yielding to others can evoke resentment, especially if humility feels imposed or if it challenges deeply held pride or entitlement. This can create inner conflict, where the individual struggles between genuine humility and a sense of injustice or frustration.

**Insecurity** Humility can magnify feelings of inadequacy or self-doubt, especially in competitive environments where acknowledging limits is perceived as weakness. This insecurity can hinder self-expression or lead to withdrawal from challenges.

**Frustration** Admitting mistakes or acknowledging dependence on others can be frustrating, particularly for those accustomed to autonomy or control. This frustration can delay acceptance of oneself and reality, and hinder self-development.

**Envy** Comparing oneself to others while embracing humility can lead to envy, particularly when others appear more capable, successful, or celebrated. This can undermine the positive aspects of humility by fostering dissatisfaction with one's own abilities or achievements.

**Bitterness** When humility arises from repeated failures or external humiliation, it can lead to bitterness or cynicism, especially if these experiences feel undeserved or overwhelming, if they represent more than we can bear psychologically. This can prevent the individual from finding the growth or wisdom that humility can ideally inspire.

**Regret** Humility often involves reflecting on past choices, which can evoke deep regret for missed opportunities, mistakes, or harm caused to others. This regret can manifest as moral pain through the experience of remorse. While such feelings can motivate change, excessive dwelling on it can lead to stagnation or despair.

**Fear** The openness and honesty required by humility can make individuals feel vulnerable, thus they fear being exploited, judged, or misunderstood by others. This fear may lead to defensiveness or avoidance, hindering authentic connections or well-being.

**Helplessness** Accepting one's limits can evoke a sense of helplessness, particularly when facing challenges that seem insurmountable or beyond one's control. This feeling can sap motivation and lead to passivity if not compensated with hope or a sense of agency.

**Disillusionment** Humility can lead to disillusionment when one realizes that certain ideals, goals, or beliefs were unrealistic or based on pride. While this can be a path to wisdom, it can also evoke feelings of despair or emptiness, leading to depression.

While humility fosters growth and resilience, it can evoke a complex range of negative emotions, including anxiety, insecurity, frustration, envy, and regret. These feelings, though challenging, can still



be part of the process of personal transformation and can ultimately lead to greater self-awareness and maturity when navigated constructively, as they can constructively shape our worldview, mental state and behavior.

*Humility and anger*

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Paradoxically, people who promote humility periodically tend to act aggressively and speak dismissively. Probably they experience an inner conflict between their ideal and reality, or between an ideal self and their actual behavior. Even though their anger seems to contradict the very principle of humility.

Let us first examine why we consider such a behavior can be considered a contradiction, why anger and humility are opposed.

**Self-control:** humility requires self-discipline and composure, control over one's emotions, while anger stems from a lack of these qualities.

**Self-importance:** anger arises when the person feels their image is threatened, whereas humility involves transcending such primitive reactions.

**Judgmental:** anger often implies a judgment based on a sense of superiority, a harsh attitude which contradicts the self-awareness, modesty, acceptance and empathy central to humility.

**Self-centered:** humility prioritizes others, but anger shifts focus to personal grievances and personal expectations, undermining this out-

ward orientation. Anger focuses on one's own needs or feelings above others, conflicting with the selflessness of humility.

**Conflictual:** Humility seeks peace and harmony, while anger fuels conflict and disrupts relationships.

**Vulnerability:** an angry person protects or defends themselves against a feeling of weakness in themselves, a lack of power which they try to compensate for, whereas humility embraces vulnerability as a strength.

**Intolerance:** Humility fosters patience and acceptance, which are directly opposed to the aggressiveness and intolerance of anger.

**Pride:** Anger often arises from wounded self-image or not getting one's way, whereas humility involves letting go of pride and embracing modesty, it implies an acceptance of circumstances.

**Impatience:** Humility fosters patience and understanding, when anger is a manifestation of impulsivity and intolerance.

**Resistance:** An angry person rejects criticism and suggestions, whereas humility involves being open to feedback as a means for self-development.

**Reactivity:** Humility promotes calm and measured responses, when anger is an uncontrolled emotional reaction.

**Respect:** Acting in anger ignores the respect of others, while humility promotes mutual valuation and trust.

Let us now examine why such a contradiction between proning humility and anger occurs.

**Internal conflict** While they may advocate humility, their own identity might still seek validation or dominance. The aggressive behavior could be a way to assert themselves anyhow, to sublimate their own contradiction, or to defend themselves against perceived threats to their self-image, including their appearance as being humble.

**Insecurity** People who emphasize humility may have insecurities they have not resolved, about their own insufficiencies in relation to their strong ideal. Aggression can be a defense mechanism to mask their anxiety, projecting them outward rather than confronting them internally.

**Moral Superiority** Those who emphasize humility, paradoxically, feel morally superior in promoting it, and they are attached to this concept. This sense of superiority can lead to impatience or frustration with others who they perceive as “not humble enough”, resulting in aggressive attitudes toward them. The irony of the situation is that they therefore do not practice what they preach. Since they are most likely conscious of this internal discrepancy, visible to themselves and to others, it increases the anger.

**Vulnerability** True humility requires vulnerability and self-acceptance, which can be uncomfortable, especially when people are proud and insecure. If someone struggles with being vulnerable, they may become defensive or aggressive when they feel their humility or their intentions are questioned or criticized.

**Dogmatism** People who idealize humility might hold themselves and others to very high, unrealistic and rigid, standards. When reality does not match these ideals, they may respond with aggression, feeling frustrated by the “failure” of others or themselves to live up to these ideals. They have a rather rigid idea of humility, they do not take humility humbly. Where there is potential for perversion in human behavior, perversion is likely to occur. Humility was initially introduced as a goal of inner cultivation, intended to bring people inner peace. However, over time, it has transformed into a rigid requirement, with people merely displaying humility superficially while having lost the true spirit of it. This rigidity has caused humility to take on an aggressive form.

The principle of humility is a regulatory ideal, guiding our actions as well as possible but impossible to really fulfill. But promoting humility without fully embodying it, a rather impossible task, often engenders tension and leads to negative behaviors, such as aggression, when people become conscious of the discrepancy, especially when they feel challenged or defensive about their claim.

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*Nietzsche*

To conclude this part, we should mention the writings of Nietzsche, who is a strong critic of humility. He claims it originates from people who lack power or feel oppressed to act, who then adopt humility as a virtue in order to devalue others who are more powerful or more successful. They channel their suppressed envy and frustration, what he calls “resentment”, into constructing a moral framework that inverts the natural order. In this “slave morality,” traits such as humility, meekness, and self-denial become virtues, while qualities like pride, ambition, and power are denounced as “evil”. Nietzsche argues

that the values born from resentment, such as humility, arise as a kind of creative, reactive process. When people feel oppressed or powerless, they are unable to assert life-affirming qualities like strength or assertiveness, so they have to create new values to give meaning to their lives. This inversion is “creative” because it isn’t merely a rejection of the dominant values; it actively redefines what is considered morally good. The oppressed, lacking the means to change their external circumstances, create their own values in order to justify their position and to subvert the values of the powerful. In doing so, they give birth to a new set of moral ideals that serve as both a psychological coping mechanism and a social tool to gain a kind of moral superiority, even if that superiority is rooted in a reaction against what they cannot possess. For him, this creative revaluation of values is double-edged. On one hand, it represents the ingenuity of a resentful spirit that refuses to accept its inferiority; on the other, it is life-denying because it celebrates weakness over strength.

He writes: “The slave revolt in morals begins when resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the resentment of beings who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, compensate by an imaginary vengeance... While the noble man lives in trust and openness with himself... the man of resentment is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul squints; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as his world, his security, his refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble.”

Thus, according to him, those “humble” people are liars, deceitful, delusional, dishonest, hypocrites, angry and weak.

# Chapter IV

## Misconceptions of humility

*commonly received ideas*

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There are several common misconceptions about humility, a number of erroneous presuppositions regarding what it means to be humble.

**“Humility means low self-esteem or self-deprecation”** Many assume that humility requires diminishing oneself or having a low opinion of one’s abilities. True humility doesn’t mean underestimating oneself but rather having an accurate, adequate view of oneself, acknowledging both our strengths and limitations without seeking excessive praise.

**“Humility is passivity or lack of assertiveness”** Some believe that humble people must be passive, quiet, or unwilling to take a stand or any initiative. However, humility involves a willingness to listen and consider others’ perspectives, but it does not imply avoiding assertiveness when necessary.

**“Humility means avoiding leadership or ambition”** There is an assumption that humble people cannot be leaders or would not have big aspirations. In reality, humility can enhance leadership, as humble leaders are often more empathetic, open to feedback, and supportive of their collaborators, an attitude which ensures them a certain success.

**“Humility requires denying or hiding one’s achievements”** Humility is not about pretending we have not realized any significant accomplishments, or refusing acknowledgement from others. Humble people can appreciate recognition but typically do so without letting it inflate their sense of worth, it does not modify their behavior and self-conception.

**“Humility is about pleasing others”** It is often assumed that humble people must always defer to others, fulfill their expectatives, even at their own expense. True humility does not mean pleasing everyone, it does indeed imply respecting others, but just as much respecting oneself.

These diverse misconceptions often stem from equating humility with self-denial or submissiveness. In reality, humility is about understanding one’s true place, neither elevating nor diminishing oneself in comparison to others, and avoiding unwarranted comparison.

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*shy and humble*

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A common mistake about humility is to confuse it with shyness.

Let us explain the difference between those two attitudes or mind-sets.

Shyness is a personality trait that involves feeling nervous, self-conscious, or uncomfortable in social situations. Shy people avoid attention or interaction because of a fear of judgment or discomfort in social settings. It generally stems from social anxiety or a heightened sensitivity to others' perceptions, which leads to hesitancy to speak up or put oneself forward. Shy individuals often focus on what others might think of them, making them cautious or reserved in expressing themselves or taking action.

Humility, on the other hand, is an attitude or mindset involving an adequate and modest view of oneself. Humble people do not feel the need to assert their superiority or seek validation from others. Humility reflects an adequate self-awareness, recognizing both strengths and limitations, without needing to compare oneself to others. Humble individuals openly share their thoughts and talents, but they do so without boasting or trying to elevate themselves above others. Humility is a moral choice, a value-based approach, rather than a personality trait, and it does not stem from social anxiety.

The motivation behind shyness is often fear of judgment or social discomfort, leading to pulling back from social engagement, to withdrawing into themselves. In humility, the focus is not on avoiding judgment but on respecting oneself and others equally, leading to rational self-expression. Humility involves a lack of pretension, not a lack of self-confidence, it often includes an outward focus on others, while shyness is more self-focused due to anxiety.

Shy people struggle to express themselves, even if they have strong ideas, because of nervousness. Humble people, in contrast, can be self-expressive and confident but do so without self-centeredness or seeking approval. Therefore, while shy people avoid the spotlight out of fear or discomfort, while secretly hoping for recognition or admira-



tion, humble people do not seek attention because they do not need it to feel validated. Shyness is more motivated by fear, while humility is a chosen or cultivated approach to one's self-image and interactions with others.

Shy people can often seem humble because they avoid attention and may not talk about their achievements. However, shy people are not necessarily humble, far from it. They tend to be preoccupied with how they are perceived by others. This self-focus doesn't necessarily mean they see themselves in a modest or balanced way, rather the opposite. They just fear judgment, including their own, thus they are highly sensitive to what others think, which easily implies that they strongly expect recognition or admiration. And they worry about not getting it, so they prefer to censor themselves, unless they feel "safe" to show their true face. The shy person is actually waiting for the right context or the right opportunity to manifest their "power". They often show in private, for example in the family context, an abusive facet of themselves that remains invisible in public. The shy person tends to be narcissistic, they have a "great" idea of their own person, but they have doubts, so they avoid exposing themselves by fear that others will not recognize them. They do not wish to see their "great" image trampled on.

A shy person avoids expressing themselves or sharing their achievements out of fear, not out of modesty or a low need for recognition. They actually value external approval and validation deeply but avoid seeking it due to fear of rejection or negative judgment. A humble person, however, may or not seek recognition, but generally isn't overly reliant on it for self-worth. Shy people often crave validation and recognition even if they don't actively seek it. This contrasts with humility, where the person generally doesn't feel a strong need for

recognition and isn't overly invested in proving themselves superior or special. Shy individuals often have a strong ego or sensitivity to comparison with others. They are reluctant to speak up or contribute, not because they are humble, but because they worry about how they compare to others or feel inadequate. In contrast, humble people typically accept their strengths and limitations without placing heavy emphasis on how they stack up against others.

Shyness is often characterized by social withdrawal, while humility involves openness to others, to feedback, and to one's own limitations. A humble person is willing to engage and learn without feeling defensive or competitive, while a shy person may avoid situations due to discomfort rather than a genuine openness to learning from others.

In short, shy people avoid the spotlight out of discomfort, but this doesn't necessarily mean they have a humble view of themselves. Humility involves a balanced and grounded self-perception, while shyness is more about social anxiety and concern for others' opinions, while often entertaining ideas of grandeur for oneself.

### *Is Humility Negative?*

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Contrary to a common assumption, one can answer that humility does not imply a negative or reductive view of oneself, but rather a realistic and reasonable understanding of one's limits and of one's place in the universe. Humility does not deny human capacities and dignity; instead, it simply acknowledges that the individual is neither entirely autonomous, nor absolute, nor at the center of everything.

Here are several aspects to consider.

**Recognition of Limits** Humility involves recognizing one's own limits, errors, and imperfections. However, this recognition is not nec-

essarily a condemnation or devaluation of man. On the contrary, it can be seen as a way to free oneself from pride and the false image of perfection. For example, in Christianity, humility is often presented as a means of acknowledging that man is a creature, a being dependent on God. This relationship to God confers upon man a special dignity, having been created in God's image while at the same time reminding him of his natural limits.

**Greatness** Several spiritual and philosophical traditions consider humility to be a pathway to genuine greatness. To be humble, one must not only recognize one's weaknesses, but also accept one's dignity and responsibilities. In this perspective, humility is a form of wisdom that allows the individual to see themselves as they truly are, without diminishing themselves, yet without overestimating themselves either. Humility thus becomes a quality that enables one to progress, to learn, and to open oneself up to others and to the world. By being aware of one's limits, the humble person is also capable of surpassing themselves and aspiring to virtue, accepting help from grace, from others, and exhibiting a certain nobility of soul or superior wisdom.

Humility, therefore, does not consist of demeaning oneself or denying one's own worth. It simply means not exaggerating one's own importance and not being self-centered. It invites the individual to recognize that their qualities and achievements may be relative, dependent on external factors or the support of others. Thus, to conceive that humility implies a "negative" view of man would be a misunderstanding. Rather, it reflects a nuanced and balanced perspective, one that sees both the dignity and the finiteness of human nature.

**Relationship** Humility often reminds man that he is part of a larger whole, that he is not self-sufficient, and that he needs others in order to live fully. This perspective leads to attitudes of respect, openness, and solidarity, because humility enables one to see value in others and to detach oneself from one's own self or image. This is not a negative view of man; on the contrary, it celebrates human interdependence and the strength of union with others. By recognizing that one's own worth is not absolute, the humble individual becomes more sensitive to the needs and qualities of others and, in doing so, becomes more "powerful."

**Philosophical differences** In Christianity, humility is linked to the recognition of God as the source of all goodness, and of man as a dependent creature. This dependence does not diminish man but rather places him within a harmonious relationship with the Creator, which in turn reinforces his dignity. In fact, by accepting one's limitation, we become more available to God's grace, what was called in Latin *capax dei*, capable of God. In Buddhism, humility stems from the understanding that the ego is an illusion and that true happiness lies in detachment and compassion for all beings. In Stoicism, humility is manifested through the acceptance of what lies beyond our control. Recognizing our limits in relation to nature and the cosmos is seen as a strength, as it allows us to focus our energy on what is within our power, rather than as a devaluation.

Rather than representing a negative vision, humility denotes a realistic and authentic view of humanity. Humility is a way of celebrating one's true nature, with its strengths and limitations, and living it fully from a perspective of moral and spiritual progress. It does not imply demeaning man, but rather freeing him from the illusions of pride

and egocentrism, by reorienting him towards a truer understanding of himself and his place among others. Thus, humility does not devalue man; it situates him within a framework of authentic dignity and interconnectedness, where his value is recognized without exaggeration and where he can develop in harmony with the world around him.

# Chapter V

## Humility in the West

### *Introduction*

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Humility, as a moral value and virtue, was not specifically introduced by Christianity in the West, but this religion played a major role in its promotion and institutionalization in culture. Let us examine the historical and philosophical emergence of humility since Antiquity and its evolution with Christianity.

**Greece** In Ancient Greece, humility was called *tapeinos*, often translated as "humble" or "low," but it was generally not considered a positive virtue. It was often associated with weakness, submission, or indignity. Greek ideals valued qualities such as magnanimity, excellence, and honor, which involved self-assertion and concern for personal greatness. However, in some philosophical traditions, such as Stoicism, there were ideas close to humility, particularly in recognizing one's limited place in the universe and the need to master personal pretensions, such as arrogance, presumption, or vanity. This

indicates a constant concern among them: avoiding illusions about oneself and controlling passions that disrupt reason.

**Rome** For the Romans, humility was also perceived as an attitude of weakness. Roman society valued masculinity, glory, and prestige. Virtues such as *gravitas* (dignity) or *virtus* (moral strength, courage) opposed the idea of "lowering oneself." However, in a religious context, humility was sometimes recognized as an appropriate attitude before the gods, associated with piety, but it remained marginal.

**Judaism** In the Old Testament, humility was already valued, particularly in the relationship between man and God. For example, Moses is described as "the most humble of men." The Prophets encourage people to "walk humbly with your God," and the Psalms praise the humble, whom God elevates. This conception of humility as recognition of dependence on God influenced Christian thought.

### *Christianity*

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Christianity introduced a reversal of the dominant values of Antiquity. While Greco-Roman culture tended to value glory, power, and honor, the Christian message exalted the humble, the poor, and the "small". "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5). "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:11) "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." (Matthew 19:30) Jesus himself embodies humility: born in a modest condition, living a life of service, and accepting death on the cross, an execution reserved for criminals and slaves.

For early Christians, humility became a fundamental virtue because it reflected dependence on God and the recognition of one's own limits. Saint Augustine (4th-5th century) emphasized humility as the foundation of all virtue, as it allows one to recognize that all good comes from God. This emphasis was also reflected in Christian asceticism and monastic life, where humility was actively practiced as a means of imitating Christ. With the Christianization of the Roman Empire, humility became an institutional value, particularly within the Church. Religious leaders, bishops, and abbots were expected to demonstrate humility in their role as servants of God and the community. However, this emphasis on humility led to tensions with political or personal ambitions, showing the difficulty of authentically practicing humility. Thus, in the Christian tradition, humility is not a weakness but a strength, as it allows one to be freed from pride, which is considered the root of all sins, a weakening of the soul. This idea deeply influenced Western culture, where humility became a widely recognized moral value.

In modern times, thinkers such as Nietzsche criticized this Christian promotion of humility, viewing it as a form of submission or "slave morality" that prevents man from fully asserting his power and creativity. However, other philosophical and spiritual traditions, including non-Christian ones, have reinterpreted humility as an essential quality for living in harmony with oneself and with others. Thus, Christianity did not invent humility, but it transformed, universalized, and integrated it into the foundations of Western culture.



Nevertheless, in the history of Christianity, there exists a notable tension between traditions that emphasize a positive view of humanity, such as the concept of *imago viva Dei* ( living image of God), and those that focus more on a negative view of human nature, centered on sin and the Fall. These divergences reflect differences in how Christian thinkers have interpreted the human condition, the relationship with God, and the necessity of grace.

The concept of *imago Dei* highlights the fundamental dignity of humanity, created in the image of God, capable of reflecting divine attributes such as love, justice, and creativity. This perspective is often associated with a theology that values human capacity to cooperate with God. Here are some examples. Irenaeus of Lyon (2nd century) viewed humanity as created good but immature, destined to grow into the likeness of God. The Fall was not an irreparable disaster but a stage in a maturation process. Thomas Aquinas (13th century) insisted that the image of God remains in humanity even after the Fall, particularly in reason and free will. Grace perfects human nature rather than replacing it.

In some traditions, such as classical Catholicism or certain Orthodox schools of thought, humans are seen as capable of collaborating with divine grace to restore the image of God within them. This perspective emphasizes the active participation of humans in their salvation. The Orthodox Church particularly emphasizes theosis or deification, where humans are called to fully participate in the divine nature, highlighting their high spiritual potential. Some Christian traditions further emphasize human virtues (love, justice, service) as expressions of *imago Dei*, valuing human dignity and vocation even in a world marked by sin. Other traditions, however, emphasize original sin and total depravity. This perspective considers Adam and

Eve's Fall as a catastrophe that corrupted human nature as a whole, creating a form of ontological guilt. Humans are seen as incapable of doing good without the radical intervention of divine grace. Here are some examples. Saint Augustine (5th century) developed a specific doctrine of original sin, asserting that all humans are born in a state of sin and are entirely dependent on divine grace for salvation. John Calvin (16th century), a principal founder of the Reformed Protestant tradition, insisted on the concept of "total depravity," arguing that humanity is incapable of turning to God by itself due to sin. Some traditions insist that, because of sin, humans are completely powerless and that only God's sovereign grace can restore the relationship with Him. For example, Martin Luther (16th century) emphasized justification by faith alone as the source of salvation, arguing that human works contribute nothing to salvation. Human nature is entirely dependent on divine mercy. Thus, some perspectives emphasize human weakness, pride, and the tendency to sin due to a fallen nature. This outlook has sometimes encouraged strict asceticism and skepticism toward human achievements, fostering a deep sense of humility.

The original Christian texts, which are diverse in nature, already reflect this internal doctrinal tension. The creation narrative (Genesis 1-2) highlights humanity's original goodness, created in the image of God. The Fall narrative (Genesis 3) introduces the reality of sin and separation from God, leading to divergent interpretations of humanity's "natural condition." Later, various theological traditions, influenced by Plato and Aristotle, such as in Thomas Aquinas, tended to emphasize human capacity to strive toward the good and self-improvement. In contrast, traditions influenced by Stoic or Manichean pessimism, or with Augustine, emphasized human fragility and the corruption of our nature. During periods of cri-

sis or insecurity, such as the fall of the Roman Empire or the Protestant Reformation, negative views of humanity were sometimes amplified, with a greater emphasis on total dependence on God. Conversely, in more stable contexts, more positive and balanced perspectives emerged.

Thus two theological perspectives are opposed. A theology that emphasizes *imago Dei* values human dignity and potential, and a theology centered on sin emphasizing humility and total dependence on God. However, some modern Christian traditions seek to reconcile these perspectives. They recognize both the greatness of human vocation as the image of God and the reality of the Fall, which obscures this image but does not destroy it. In this view, redemption in Jesus Christ is understood as the process of restoring this original image. Thus, the history of Christianity reflects an ongoing tension between a positive and a negative view of humanity, ultimately mirroring the paradox of the human condition in its relationship with the divine.

#### *Historical continuity*

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Some theorists argue that the introduction of humility as a virtue constitutes a radical revolution in Western history. They assume that until the arrival of early Christianity, in ancient wisdom traditions, the spiritual path consisted of discovering divinity within oneself through a kind of "natural" process. They believe that in pre-Christian wisdom traditions, the goal was solely to strip away illusions and, through practice, realize that one's deepest nature is identical to that of God, the Absolute, or ultimate Truth. With Christianity, however, the conception of human nature radically changed, as human beings were now seen as sinners.

The English word "sin" originates from the Old English term "synn," which referred to a transgression against divine law or moral wrongdoing. The term is etymologically linked to the idea of being "truly guilty" against an accusation or charge. In the Hebrew Bible, the word for sin is "chata", fundamentally means "to miss the mark" or "to fail." This term conveys the notion of failing to meet a standard or goal, particularly in a moral or religious context, and it is similar, in ancient Greek, with the term "hamartia". It emphasizes the idea of failing to achieve a desired moral standard or falling short in one's duties. In Latin languages, the diverse terms used derive from « *pec-care* », meaning "to stumble", "to fail", therefore "to commit a fault". We see that across these languages, the concept of "sin" is closely associated with the idea of failing to meet a moral or divine standard, depicted metaphorically as missing a target, "falling", therefore "failing". And through the concept of original sin, this sinful quality becomes ontological, it is the very nature of man, an original and therefore fundamental fault. Consequently, God would inherently not be with us or within us, we would be estranged from the divine power.

Yet, as we are His creatures, as we are in his image, there must remain a trace of Him within us, albeit one that is difficult to decipher. The spiritual path is then meant to illuminate the infinite and irreducible distance between us and God. It is through awareness of this distance that the Christian knows God, not directly, but through reflections and shadows, always by means of cryptic mediations. They often refer to Paul's words: "For now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12), yet they overlook John's statement: "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9), which offers a more "encouraging" perspective.

Thus, man comes to know himself as a wandering being who must humble himself before God, repent and hope for grace. Salvation cannot come from within us; we are incapable of guiding ourselves. The attitude that becomes necessary, then, is humility, not only as a moral virtue but as an existential and epistemological quality through which the individual acknowledges his fundamental heteronomy and his epistemic impotence. Humility is not merely about actions or behaviors; it pertains to our very essence, to how we situate ourselves in the world and understand our place in the universe. It implies the recognition of our finitude, our limitations, and our dependence on some transcendent power, be it nature, others, or God for believers. It represents an awareness of our cognitive limits, our inability to know or fully comprehend everything. This means accepting that our perceptions and understandings of the world are partial, limited, and biased, and it invites us to remain open to learning, questioning ourselves, and recognizing our dependence on external sources for acquiring new knowledge. Understanding and accepting this fundamental heteronomy consists in recognizing this dependence and abandoning the illusion of total autonomy, acknowledging that humans have intrinsic limitations in their ability to fully know or understand the world, to access ultimate truth or the Absolute. Humility, then, is about accepting this impotence without arrogance or despair, cultivating openness to “another” reality, one that is more substantial. This represents an expanded vision of humility, which goes beyond mere modesty to become a fundamental attitude toward life, identity, and knowledge.

Nevertheless, traces of such an attitude can already be found in pre-Christian spiritual traditions. In Neoplatonism, Plotinus and his successors advocated union with the First Principle, the One, but this re-

quired a rigorous process of intellectual and moral purification, which included an ascent toward a transcendent principle. The One is not immanent in the human soul; it is a goal to be attained through an elevating journey, not merely a discovery of the self. In Stoicism, divinity is not strictly discovered within oneself but rather in harmony with the universal *logos*. Man must live according to divine reason, present in the order of the cosmos, yet this approach also values personal discipline rather than a direct identification with the divine. In Manichaeism, this dualistic religion sees man as torn between the forces of light and darkness. The goal is not so much to discover God within oneself but to liberate the divine soul, which is trapped in the material world. This vision of man already reflects a certain distance from the divine. The idea proposed by Socrates, that the human being is “a divine spark embedded into the mud”, also implies a problematic human nature. This principle has its origins in earlier traditions, such as Orphism, and belongs to an ancient tradition of spiritual and cosmological thought. One can see how this engenders, in the Socratic model, an attitude of deep humility: “I know that I know nothing”, which constantly pushes him toward inquiry and dialogue.

Thus, Christian theology teaches that man was created good, in the image of God, but the original sin introduced corruption into human nature. However, this “sinful nature” is not perceived as man’s deepest and most essential nature; rather, salvation aims precisely to restore this original divine image. Moreover, while God is transcendent, Christianity also values the notion of a personal relationship with God, particularly through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which establishes a link between the divine and the human. Christian theology also emphasizes the “inhabitation”, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit or of the Trinity in the soul in a state of grace, which some-

what relativizes the perceived distance between man and God. And in many Christian traditions, particularly in mysticism and Orthodoxy, man is called to union with God through theosis or deification, showing that this distance is not considered insurmountable.

In Christianity, humility is not merely the acceptance of one's weakness or ignorance; it also involves the recognition of one's dignity as a creature of God and the possibility of spiritual progress through divine grace. Furthermore, reducing humility to mere submission can lead to a misinterpretation of the Christian virtue, which also includes trust in God and in man's ability to improve himself by cooperating with grace. Christian humility is primarily a moral virtue, and although it has implications for self-knowledge and the knowledge of God, it cannot be presented as an absolute incapacity to know. Through faith, prayer, and grace, man can know God, partially but appropriately. Additionally, the conception of man's role in salvation and his relationship with God varies among different Christian traditions. Catholicism emphasizes cooperation between grace and human free will. Protestantism insists more on total dependence on grace. Orthodoxy highlights the process of deification, where man is called to union with God, thus somewhat reducing the ontological distance between the human and the divine.

So, although Christianity has introduced a renewed conception of humility, establishing it as a central virtue, this virtue has roots in the philosophical and religious traditions of antiquity. The idea of linking humility specifically to man's relationship with God, to the recognition of his dependence on divine grace, echoes, for example, the Stoic idea that finding one's place in the cosmic order implies a form of humility in the face of nature and destiny.

# Chapter VI

## Figures of humility

As an illustration of the concept of humility, let us briefly describe a few famous historical figures that often incarnate this concept, in different ways. Although, of course, we will recognize certain key patterns of humility in these famous characters.

**Laozi (China, 6th century BCE)** Laozi, the semi-legendary founder of Taoism and author of the Tao Te Ching, extolled humility as a central virtue in his philosophy. In Taoism, humility is associated with aligning oneself with the natural flow of the universe, or Tao, by letting go of ego, ambition, and the desire for control. Laozi taught that humility involves yielding, patience, and simplicity, likening it to the softness of water, which, though gentle, can shape even the hardest stone. His teachings emphasize a quiet, self-effacing humility that values inner harmony over external power, advocating for living in accordance with nature rather than striving for fame or dominance.

**Buddha (India, 563–483 BCE)** Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, left his royal life in search of enlightenment and dedicated



himself to understanding and alleviating human suffering. After attaining enlightenment, he taught the “Middle Way,” which emphasizes balance, compassion, and humility. The Buddha’s humility is evident in his teachings about anatta (non-self), which urges individuals to let go of ego and attachments. Rather than positioning himself as a divine figure, he referred to himself as a guide and emphasized that anyone could attain enlightenment through mindful living and compassion.

**Confucius (China, 551–479 BCE)** Confucius, the influential Chinese philosopher, emphasized humility as a key aspect of ethical conduct and societal harmony. He advocated virtues like ren (benevolence) and li (proper conduct), an attitude which include humility in interactions with others. Confucius often regarded himself as a seeker rather than a master of knowledge, famously saying, “When I walk with two others, both serve as my teachers.” He lived modestly and traveled to spread his teachings, prioritizing moral integrity over personal glory. Confucius’ humble approach to learning and relationships laid the foundation for Confucianism, which values humility, respect, and service.

**Socrates (Greece, 470–399 BCE)** Socrates, one of the founding figures of Western philosophy, famously declared, “I know that I know nothing,” which became a cornerstone of his philosophical method. Rather than presenting himself as an authority, Socrates humbly sought truth through questioning, believing that wisdom begins with recognizing one’s own ignorance. He was a strong critic of knowledge as a form of fallacious power and pretension, in opposition to the true power of reason, accessible to all. His humility was shown through

his approach to learning and teaching, where he encouraged others to seek knowledge without arrogance or pride. Socrates' insistence on dialogue and self-inquiry as pathways to wisdom reflects a profound humility that valued truth above personal recognition.

**Marcus Aurelius (Rome, 121–180 CE)** Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, is widely respected for his humility, integrity, and commitment to wisdom. Despite holding immense power, he viewed his role as a duty to serve the Roman people rather than a means of self-glorification. In his “Meditations”, Marcus Aurelius reflected on the importance of self-discipline, modesty, and recognizing the fleeting nature of fame and power. His writings show a deep humility in facing life's challenges, as he constantly reminded himself to act with compassion, restraint, and mindfulness of his own limitations, seeking wisdom over personal gain.

**King Ashoka (India, 304–232 BCE)** Ashoka, initially a powerful and often ruthless ruler of the Maurya Empire in ancient India, underwent a profound transformation after witnessing the horrors of war. Following his conversion to Buddhism, he embraced humility and dedicated his life to ruling with compassion, justice, and moral integrity. Ashoka promoted nonviolence, established laws to protect animals and vulnerable groups, and spread Buddhist teachings across Asia. His humility is reflected in his desire to serve his people and promote peace, as he prioritized general well-being over expanding his own power or empire.

**Francis of Assisi (Italy, 1181 – 1226)** Saint Francis of Assisi is widely regarded as a profound example of humility. His life and teach-

ings are often cited as embodying humility through simplicity, compassion, and a deep respect for all creation. He voluntarily chose a life of destitution, giving up his family wealth and status to live among the poor. He adopted a simple lifestyle, even wearing a coarse robe and living in misery, in order to be fully connected to the most vulnerable members of society, as he let go of any personal comfort or privilege to serve others and embody his own values. Saint Francis showed deep reverence for all creatures and the natural world, seeing animals, plants, and the environment as part of God's creation. His famous *Canticle of the Sun*, in which he addresses the sun, moon, wind, and animals as "brother" and "sister," reflects his humble view that humans are not superior but rather interconnected with all life, recognizing and honoring the inherent dignity of all creation. He devoted himself to helping the poor, the sick, and the outcasts of society, including lepers, often shunned at the time, identifying with those who are marginalized, without any sense of superiority. He avoided any recognition or praise for his actions and teachings. He discouraged his followers from seeking power, status, or wealth, instead urging them to live in humility and obedience. When people began to admire him as a saintly figure, he often deflected this attention, emphasizing his own limitations and imperfections and directing others toward a focus on God rather than on himself, as humility meant complete submission to the divine will. He saw himself as a servant of God, willing to sacrifice his own desires and needs to fulfill what he believed was a divine calling. His prayer, "Make me an instrument of your peace," reflects his desire to serve as a humble channel of love, peace, and compassion, rather than seeking personal significance.

**Mahatma Gandhi (India, 1869 – 1948)** Gandhi led India's movement for independence through nonviolent resistance, emphasizing the importance of serving others, rejecting material wealth, and living simply. His personal lifestyle choices, such as wearing simple, hand-spun clothes, living in modest housing, and practicing vegetarianism, reflected his commitment to humility and solidarity with the poorest people in India. Gandhi's humility was not self-effacing but rooted in his conviction that a leader must serve and uplift others rather than pursue personal gain or power.

**Simone Weil (France, 1909 – 1943)** Simone Weil was a philosopher and mystic whose life was marked by deep empathy for the oppressed and an intense spiritual quest. She voluntarily chose to share the living conditions of factory workers, seeking to understand their suffering and humiliation from the inside. She described this experience as a form of "servitude" that affected her deeply, confronting her with humiliation and affliction. For her, humility implied a "self-annihilation" in order to access truth, specifying that "we don't have to acquire humility, there is humility in us." Through her life of self-sacrifice, her commitment to the disadvantaged and her profound reflection on the nature of humility, Simone Weil embodies this virtue in an exemplary way.

**Mother Teresa (Albania, 1910 – 1997)** Mother Teresa devoted her life to helping the "poorest of the poor" in Calcutta and founded the Missionaries of Charity, an organization committed to aiding those in need. She lived modestly and worked among the sick, the dying, and the marginalized, choosing to remain close to those she served. Her humility was evident in her daily life, as she shunned fame and recog-

nition, often deflecting praise toward her mission rather than herself. She demonstrated humility by treating every person she encountered with compassion and dignity, regardless of their social status or condition.

**Nelson Mandela (South Africa, 1918 – 2013)** Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison for his activism against apartheid in South Africa, emerged as a leader focused on reconciliation rather than revenge. Despite the hardships he endured, Mandela was willing to engage in dialogue with former adversaries or persecutors to build a more just society. As South Africa's first Black president, he practiced humility by listening to others, working collaboratively, and refusing to use his position to assert personal power. Mandela's humility was rooted in his deep commitment to justice, unity, and the well-being of all South Africans, and he consistently put the interests of his country above his own.

These diverse figures, although endowed with a strong personality, demonstrated humility through self-restraint, self-effacement, compassion, and a commitment to service, each of them placing a high value on ethical leadership and the welfare of others over personal ambition or power. They illustrate that true humility is grounded in self-awareness, strength, and a commitment to lifting others. Their legacies have influenced diverse cultural values of humility in philosophy, social activism and spirituality across centuries.

# Chapter VII

## The case of Jesus

### *The paradox*

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Jesus Christ is an interesting case of the paradox of humility. On one hand, he has quite a “glorious” life, he speaks quite boldly about himself, when he self-describes as “The son of God”, claiming “I am the way, the truth, and the life”. He declares in no uncertain terms “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.” He has ambitious plans about himself and humanity, but he remains as a major historical example of humility, as exemplified by different aspects of his personality. He emphasized serving others as a core value, often stating that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve”. The title “Son of Man” reflects humility in several significant ways, emphasizing both Jesus’ identification with humanity and his willingness to take on a role of service, suffering, and sacrifice rather than one of immediate glory or power.

By calling himself the “Son of Man,” he places himself within the human experience rather than above it. This title emphasizes his full humanity, showing that he is not distanced from human struggles, limitations, and vulnerabilities. In contrast to titles like “Son of God” or “Messiah,” which could highlight a divine or prophetic status, or “King”, evoking power, prestige and political authority, “Son of Man” points to his solidarity with ordinary people and his choice to share fully in human condition. He often uses “Son of Man” in reference to his impending suffering and death, saying, for instance, “The Son of Man must suffer many things”. By using this title to describe himself as someone who will endure suffering and even death, he highlights a humility that involves self-giving and sacrifice. Rather than avoiding hardship or asserting authority to avoid his fate, he willingly embraces a path of vulnerability and suffering for the sake of others.

The phrase “Son of Man” is a modest, understated title. It does not immediately convey grandeur or status. It allowed Jesus to speak of his mission without inciting political or social expectations of immediate leadership or conquest. This title subtly emphasizes a different kind of power, a power rooted in humility, service, and self-restraint. He uses “Son of Man” to describe himself as a servant to others, stating, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. This self-description highlights humility by emphasizing that his purpose is not self-glorification but support and sacrifice. This role as a servant contrasts with the typical image of a ruler or a king, revealing that his authority is expressed through love, service, and compassion rather than domination.

In the Hebrew Bible, “son of man” is sometimes used to refer to prophets, for example when God addresses Ezekiel as “son of man” to emphasize his humanity and humility before God. Jesus’ use of

this title places him within this prophetic tradition, suggesting that he is a humble servant of God's will and a representative of humanity, rather than a figure asserting divine privilege. Even when Jesus speaks of the future glory of the "Son of Man" in an eschatological context, referring to his return at the end of times, this glory is often presented as the outcome of his humble path of suffering and service. His exaltation is not immediate but rather follows his humility, showing that his ultimate authority is rooted in his own sacrifice.

Thus, the title "Son of Man" conveys humility by emphasizing Jesus' humanity, his willingness to suffer and serve, and his choice to approach his mission from a position of modesty and self-sacrifice rather than dominance or self-promotion. It reflects a form of humility that accepts a lowly role and embraces vulnerability, offering a stark contrast to expectations of grandeur and power. This choice of title helps to define Jesus' mission as one focused on love, service, and sacrifice, core aspects of humility.

Among different features of his biography, he is described as washing the feet of his disciples, a task usually reserved for servants, in order to demonstrate humility, care and dedication as essential values. He teaches that true greatness lies in assisting others. As well, he sought out and associated with those on the margins of society, including the poor, the sick, and social outcasts. This approach, which disregarded social hierarchies and valued each person equally, was a profound demonstration of humility, since no one is considered superior. He taught that everyone, regardless of their status, deserved compassion and dignity. He accepted suffering, especially in his final days, as part of his mission without seeking power or retaliation. His crucifixion is viewed in Christian teachings as the ultimate act of re-



nunciation, as he willingly endured pain and humiliation for the sake of others.

One important point should be made here. Jesus was humiliated physically and publicly, but he did not feel humiliated in the way we typically understand it. In other words, he may have experienced external humiliation without internalizing the shame or degradation that typically accompanies it. He willingly accepted this mortification as part of his mission and gift to humanity. His acceptance of “degradation” was seen as an act of ultimate humility and love, making the external shame less personally impactful because it served a higher purpose. He saw his suffering as fulfilling the divine plan, which helped him endure it without succumbing to feelings of personal humiliation. Humiliation harshly impacts people deeply because it challenges their pride, image, or self-worth. However, Jesus’ humility and personal detachment meant that he did not view his own worth through the lens of how others treated him. This distancing helped him endure the mocking, rejection, and suffering without feeling diminished or devalued by them. During his crucifixion, the Gospels describe Jesus as showing compassion even toward those who inflicted suffering upon him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. This solicitude suggests a focus on the well-being and forgiveness rather than on his own suffering or “degradation”, allowing him to transcend feelings of personal insult or shame. Jesus is generally described as having an unshakeable sense of identity and purpose, grounded in his relationship with God. Because of this, he did not seek validation from human approval, which allowed him to remain steadfast even in the face of profound decline. This description of his person highlights his humility, selflessness, and commitment to his mission, as he prioritized his purpose over

personal pride. And such a capacity to serve something larger than ourselves is probably a key feature of humility.

Jesus frequently taught about humility, urging people to “turn the other cheek”, to “love your enemies”, and to avoid seeking prominence. In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, he highlighted the humility of a repentant tax collector, contrasting it with the self-righteousness of the “good” Pharisee and emphasizing that humility in one’s heart is more important than outward appearances. Let us not forget that humility has no care for external recognition. Jesus led a simple life, emphasizing spiritual wealth over material wealth and advising his followers to do the same. He consistently avoided seeking political power, fame, or personal wealth, emphasizing a life focused on spiritual values and service. Moreover, in several Gospel accounts, Jesus recommends discretion after performing miracles, such as healing a leper, so as not to arouse superficial and vain admiration.

Thus, Jesus is considered a figure of humility because of his teachings, actions, and lifestyle, all of which centered around selflessness, service, compassion, and a willingness to forgo personal gain for the benefit of others. This humility is a cornerstone of Christian teachings and has made Jesus a widely recognized example of humble leadership and moral integrity throughout history.

### *objections*

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Some critics might object to his humility, as Jesus pretends to be the “Son of God”, or when he claims “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, statements which at first glance can contrast quite strongly with humility. In many contexts, asserting oneself as the singular path or truth could indeed come across as a sign of pride. However, in Christian interpretation, this declaration is seen differently, as an

expression not of self-centeredness but merely of spiritual authority and purpose. First of all, because such statements are understood as expressing his mission rather than a personal claim to superiority. From this perspective, he was not glorifying himself but assuming a role that he saw as given to him by God to guide humanity toward a deeper spiritual truth, toward salvation. Indeed, his identity as the “Son of God”, even as the very incarnation of God, carries unique authority, but he is merely a spokesman, a messenger. And when he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” it means that he is speaking from a “place” of divine truth rather than personal opinion and complacency. If this identity is divine in nature, then humility doesn’t imply a denial of this truth, but rather a willingness to embody it as best as possible. And anyhow, his life, as depicted in the Gospels, was characterized by humility, sacrifice, and service to others, regardless of this claim to truth or divinity. The humility lies in his actions, associating with the poor, healing the sick, and ultimately sacrificing his life. By choosing a life of simplicity and enduring suffering, he embodied humility even while making strong assertions about his spiritual role and his identity. As well, Jesus’ declaration is an invitation rather than a demand. He didn’t coerce others to believe in him; instead, he invited people to follow his teachings and find meaning through their own choice. This approach aligns with humility, as it respects individuals’ autonomy.

In this sense, Christian theology interprets Jesus’ declaration as a statement of truth rather than personal pride. From this view, it’s a humble assertion of his role within a divine plan rather than a pride-driven statement. Jesus embodies humility by fulfilling his role with compassion and generosity rather than seeking personal acclaim or

power. This interpretation helps to reconcile his bold statements with the humility seen in his life and teachings.

Being called the "Son of God" could seem, on the surface, to be at odds with humility, since it implies a unique and elevated identity. However, this identity is understood in a way that aligns with humility rather than contradicts it, since Jesus is seen as embracing his role as the Son of God not to elevate himself, but to fulfill a divine mission of love and salvation. As well, he frequently encouraged everyone to view themselves as children of God and to live in ways that reflect this relationship. Even though he is uniquely called the "Son of God", his teaching highlights both the universal love of God for humanity and the dignity and responsibility of all people to live in accord with their divine filiation. Jesus encourages people to love their enemies so that they may be "children of your Father in heaven". This teaching implies that living according to the divine principles of love and forgiveness aligns believers with their "true" nature. Therefore, to be called "Son of God" does not represent some entitlement, but a moral duty, the condition for salvation, an act of humility. Furthermore, by taking on human form and enduring human suffering, Christ embodied humility as a servant, even though his identity held divine significance.

As we said, Jesus' life was characterized by dedication, advocating for justice, and engaging compassionately with "the least of mine". This humility lay not in denying his identity, but in how he chose to express it, through altruism, sacrifice, and ultimately, his crucifixion. In this way, he is seen as using his identity not for self-promotion, but as a pathway to serve others selflessly. Jesus' humility as the Son of God is understood as an example for all men, showing that true humility is born of love of neighbor and commitment to God. By ac-

knowledging his role with reverence and submission to God's will, he demonstrated that humility does not mean denying one's identity or gifts, but using them responsibly and selflessly for the general good. In this way, Jesus' identity as the "Son of God" aligns with humility, because it is defined by his selfless actions, compassion, and willingness to suffer on behalf of others. Rather than seeking personal glory, Jesus is seen as embracing his role with simplicity, demonstrating that true greatness lies in devotion, love, and surrender.

An interesting moment in the life of Jesus, where we can doubt about a full acceptance of his "mortal" condition is the moment when, just before dying in the cross, he cries out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Is he doubting, because of his pain? Is he accusing his father of abandoning him? Is he not conscious of his limits and not accepting them, and therefore not being humble at this moment? If one were to interpret these words as potentially at odds with his submission, it would involve viewing this moment as one where he might be wrestling with his own vulnerability and the limits of his endurance, in a deeply human way. Facing unimaginable pain, he momentarily struggles to accept his weakness and his finitude. From this perspective, the depth of his anguish may reflect a deep confrontation with the human experience of feeling alone, an experience that often challenges one's humility. This momentary questioning could be viewed as a potential lapse where the intense suffering almost overwhelms his ability to accept his human shortcomings. One could interpret this as a longing for direct divine reassurance or a direct intervention, implying a momentary resistance to complete acceptance of his role or suffering. Asking "why" suggests a need for understanding or connection that may feel inconsistent with full acceptance of his vocation. This yearning could be seen as a certain departure from

the ideal of humility, which would involve embracing his suffering without needing to be comforted or consolation. Humility generally involves an acceptance of one's role, of circumstances, without complaint, a submission to reality. In this moment, Jesus' question could be viewed as a natural human response to the agony he is experiencing, reflecting a resistance to complete "welcoming" of his suffering. This cry could be seen as an expression of the intensity of his pain, perhaps hoping to postpone the deadline, or looking for an explanation, even if he already knows his destiny.

However, most theological interpretations don't see this as a departure from humility, but rather as a profound expression of Jesus' shared humanity and a demonstration that even in moments of intense despair, one can remain committed to a larger purpose. This moment is usually understood as Jesus embodying the full range of human suffering, a choice that in itself reflects great compassion. His expression of anguish underscores the integrity of his mission, experiencing the human condition in its entirety, including its most painful limits. It can be viewed as an expression of deep anguish and feeling of abandonment rather than a lack of humility, a profound expression of his earthly self, the limits of human endurance and suffering.

In Christian theology, Jesus is believed to be both fully divine and fully human. His cry of abandonment expresses the extension of human suffering and vulnerability. By voicing his "despair", he connects with the hopelessness and limits that all humans experience, showing that he is not above the human condition but fully shares in it. This identification with human suffering is seen as an ultimate act of humility, as he experiences the raw depths of despair. Jesus' cry on the cross reflects his authenticity, showing that humility includes acknowledging one's pain and limitations without concealing

or suppressing them. His words reflect humility in the sense that he does not deny his suffering or pretend to be invulnerable. Instead, he openly expresses his vulnerability, aligning with the idea that humility involves honesty about one's experiences and emotions. Therefore, Jesus' cry does not signify a rejection of God but rather the anguish of someone undergoing an extreme trial. Jesus ultimately trusts in God's plan, as expressed by his earlier prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will, but yours be done". His endurance through this feeling of abandonment, without giving up his mission, is seen as the ultimate act of humility and submission. Thus, Jesus' cry of abandonment when facing the anguish of doubt highlights his full acceptance of human limitations, his willingness to experience the depth of human suffering, coupled with his trust in God's superior plan despite a profound pain. This moment can then be viewed as a powerful expression of humility, vulnerability, and obedience.

There are diverse other moments in the life of Christ where he might appear, on the surface, to contrast with the "common" notion of humility. However, these instances can be interpreted as well in ways that reconcile them with this concept, suggesting that Jesus' actions and words reflect a different kind of humility, one grounded in a sense of purpose and divine mission rather than self-denial.

**"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"** This statement might seem bold or even self-aggrandizing, as Jesus claims a unique role as the only path to God. However, this declaration can also be seen as a humble acknowledgment of his role in the divine plan rather than a boast. The humility here lies in Jesus fulfilling his purpose without elevating himself for personal gain, but rather offering a path to spiri-

tual truth, by openly accepting the magnitude of our destiny, without minimizing it for the sake of appearances.

**The Cleansing of the Temple** When Jesus enters the Temple and overturns the tables of the money-changers, he acts with authority and righteous indignation, which may seem to contradict the gentleness often associated with humility. However, this act is interpreted as an expression of humility in that Jesus is not acting out of personal offense but out of reverence for God's house and a desire to purify it for the community. His actions are driven by his mission rather than self-centered pride.

**Forgiving Sins and Worship of Others** Throughout the Gospels, Jesus forgives people's sins and accepts worship from the faithful, acts that could seem contrary to humility since only God was seen as having the authority to forgive sins or receive worship. This could appear audacious, but these actions can as well be viewed as expressions of Jesus' divine nature rather than a personal claim to glory. The humility here is seen in Jesus acknowledging his divine role with grace and simplicity rather than using it for personal exaltation.

**Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem** Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, with people laying down palm branches and shouting "Hosanna," appears celebratory and kingly, which might seem at odds with humility. However, the choice of a donkey rather than a horse is often viewed as a humble gesture, symbolizing peace rather than military power. Christian tradition sees this moment as Jesus accepting his role as the Messiah humbly, entering as a "servant king" rather than a conquering hero.



**Miracles and Healings** The miracles performed by Jesus could be seen as acts that might draw attention to himself and seem contrary to humility, a display of power. However, he often directed people's focus to God rather than to himself, sometimes even instructing those he healed to tell no one about it. The humility here lies in performing these miracles out of compassion and divine mission rather than to gain personal acclaim.

**Son of God** Jesus' repeated affirmations of his identity as the Son of God could be viewed as self-elevating. However, this can mean that Jesus accepted his divinely appointed role rather than exalting himself. He often speaks of himself as doing the will of the Father, reflecting a humility grounded in obedience rather than self-promotion.

**King of the Jews** This term was used to describe Jesus in various contexts, both by those who mocked him and by those who saw him as a messianic figure. Many Jewish people in Jesus' time awaited a Messiah, a descendant of King David, who would reestablish Israel's kingdom, bring liberation, and fulfill the promises of God. While Jesus reframed this kingdom as spiritual rather than political, "my kingdom is not of this world", his followers and opponents sometimes interpreted it in more earthly terms. Thus Pilate ordered the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" to be placed on the cross. The discrepancy between Jesus and others of this issue of "kingship" shows his lack of interest for earthly recognition.

In each of these moments, Jesus demonstrates a humility that does not equate to self-effacement or denial of identity, but rather a willingness to accept and fulfill his role with integrity and compassion. His humility is expressed through his obedience to God's will, his com-

mitment to others, and his focus on assisting rather than dominating. While some actions might initially seem at odds with humility, they can be meaningfully interpreted as embodying a higher order humility, one that transcends traditional notions and is deeply rooted in purpose, self-sacrifice, and dedication to a greater good. Such an example sheds an interesting light on the nature of true humility, which implies not the denial of one's strengths or worth, but the conscious choice to channel them in the service of a greater purpose. True humility is not about diminishing oneself, but about recognizing one's place within a larger context and acting in alignment with it. It transcends traditional notions of modesty by combining self-awareness with self-restraint, using one's abilities with integrity, and prioritizing collective well-being over personal glory. Ultimately, humility is a powerful virtue that unites purpose, responsibility, and the strength to serve without arrogance. What can be called a "true identity".

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*Kenosis*

A core concept in Christian theology indicating humility is the term of "kenosis", or "self-emptying", which states that Jesus, though of divine nature, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, to inflate one's identity, but rather "emptying himself", to take on the form of a "servant". This self-emptying is seen as a profound act of humility: despite his divine status, Jesus chose to become fully human, experience human limitations, and ultimately sacrifice himself for others. This act emphasizes humility, as he set aside his divine privilege to serve humanity.

There is a strong similarity between the principle of kenosis, the later Christian idea of "Capax Dei" (capacity for God), the void or absence of self in certain Eastern philosophies, and other similar con-

cepts. They all explore a process of self-emptying, openness, and receptivity that allows for a deeper connection with the divine, the ultimate reality, the unconditional or the universal truth, a radical vision of self-reduction, where the "person" somewhat gives way to transcendence.

Kenosis involves the surrender of personal will, ego, and even divine prerogatives to fully embody humility and generosity, an invitation for believers to let go of self-centeredness, pride, and attachment to worldly identity, allowing God's presence and love to fill that space. This emptying of the self enables deeper communion with the divine.

Capax Dei refers to the concept that humans have an inherent capacity to receive or be filled with God. This capacity is not realized through one's own effort or will but rather through a restraintless openness to the divine grace. It implies that a person must make space within themselves, often by surrendering individuality, desires, and distractions, in order to become receptive to divine love, wisdom, or presence. The emphasis is on becoming a "vessel" for God's will rather than asserting one's own. In Eastern philosophies, particularly in Buddhism and Daoism, void or emptiness represents the absence of a fixed, inherent self or ego. The concept of void involves releasing attachment to the self, identity, and material desires, enabling the practitioner to achieve a state of harmony with the natural order (Daoism) or realization of the interdependence of all things (Buddhism). It allows one to transcend the illusions of self-centeredness or separation, and experience the unity of the totality. This state of emptiness does not imply the annihilation of reality, but is instead a profound openness to reality as it truly is, free from subjective anchoring.

All these concepts involve a form of "emptying" or letting go of personal identity, will, and attachment. In kenosis, through humil-

ity and self-sacrifice, in *Capax Dei*, through openness and receptivity to God, although these two practices are not really distinct as regards the relationship between the human and the divine. In the Eastern void, through the release of individuality and non-identification with a fixed self. This letting go creates a space where something greater can enter. Be it God's presence, the ultimate reality, the absolute or the unconditional. It involves transcending the limited, individual identity to realize a higher state of being, in order to become aligned with a larger, more encompassing reality. Though each tradition may describe this "self-purging" differently, they share the idea that fulfillment, peace, and wisdom arise when one lets go of self-centeredness. This emptiness is not a void of meaning but a state of profound receptivity and connection with ultimate truth.

# Chapter VIII

## The Case of Judaism

Another interesting case of the humility paradox is the famous idea of the Jews who define themselves as the "chosen" or "elected" people, an idea that can seem, at first glance, to contrast with humility. However, in Jewish thought, this concept doesn't imply superiority over others but rather a unique responsibility to fulfill specific ethical and spiritual duties.

Let us explain how this idea can still align with humility.

In Judaism, the concept of being "chosen" is often understood as being selected for a mission or covenant with God, not as a claim to inherent superiority over others. The tradition teaches that the "chosen" designation calls for obedience to God's commandments and an ethical life, which entails a commitment to moral conduct, justice, and compassion. The chosen status is thus seen as a call to service and responsibility rather than a mark of privilege or higher worth.

Hebrew texts often emphasize that being chosen involves significant obligations, and it can be a burden. For instance, the prophets and many rabbinic texts frequently describe the difficulties and sacrifices required of the Jewish people in fulfilling this covenant. This role

is not viewed as an easy path but as a demanding commitment, which tends to foster a sense of humility as Jews work to live up to these high standards. Canonical texts, especially the Torah and the prophets, are full of instances where the Jewish people are reminded of their faults and limitations. The Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) includes many accounts of self-critique, admonitions, and reminders that the Jewish people's chosen status depends on their faithfulness to holy teachings. This openness to self-critique encourages humility, acknowledging human limitations and the need for constant improvement.

While Jewish tradition holds that the Jewish people have a unique relationship with God, it does not diminish the value of other nations or imply that they are less worthy. In fact, many Jewish teachings emphasize that all people are created in the image of God, and Jewish law has rules to treat everyone, Jewish or not, with respect and justice. The chosen status is seen as a unique moral role, rather than an exclusive position of greater value.

In essence, the idea of being "chosen" in Judaism is understood in terms of responsibility and service, not privilege or superiority. The concept, when understood in this way, aligns with humility because it calls for self-restraint, ethical behavior, and assistance to others. The Jewish tradition's emphasis on justice, respect for others, and acknowledgment of human limitations reflects such an idea, combining a sense of purpose with a commitment to humility and ethical living.

Yet, the concept of being "chosen" or "elected" can indeed be misinterpreted or misused, leading to attitudes that may contradict humility. While the idea of chosenness in Jewish tradition is often intended as a call to responsibility and service, it can sometimes be misinterpreted or even abused in ways that foster exclusivity, superiority, or

entitlement. When the idea of being chosen is understood as implying inherent superiority, it can lead to a sense of privilege or arrogance. Such belief fosters attitudes of exclusivity or prejudice, when individuals or groups believe they hold a unique status that inherently elevates them above others. This interpretation goes against the intended humility of the concept and can lead to divisive attitudes. In some cases, chosenness can be misinterpreted as a justification for entitlement or special treatment. Rather than viewing chosenness as a duty or call to ethical action, some may misuse it to justify their actions or prioritize their needs over “others”. This perspective can foster an inflated sense of value or self-importance and contradict the principle of humility by emphasizing privilege over responsibility.

When “chosenness” is seen as a mark of inherent virtue or worthiness, it prevents self-reflection or improvement. If individuals believe they are inherently “better” or divinely favored, they may be less willing to acknowledge faults or areas for improvement. This goes against the humility embedded in many religious traditions, where introspection and spiritual growth are central to ethical living. If chosenness is taken as an indication of inherent difference or separation, it engenders an “us vs. them” mentality that excludes or devalues those outside the group. This perspective, which fosters social and religious division, is at odds with the humility that recognizes common humanity and interdependence.

While these risks exist, traditional interpretations and teachings in Judaism often counter these pitfalls, by emphasizing self-restraint, ethical behavior, and the value of all people. Many religious and spiritual leaders caution against these misinterpretations and stress that chosenness is a call to responsibility, not superiority. Nevertheless, like many religious concepts, the idea of chosenness requires care-

ful interpretation to prevent misuse and uphold its intended spirit of humility and compassion. Often, such spiritual concepts become corrupted when they are faced with human tendencies toward pride, exclusion, or the desire for dominance. When spiritual concepts intersect with personal or collective greed, for example when dealing with practical issues or the political domain, they risk being distorted into tools for justifying inequality, entitlement, or division. This highlights the need for continual reflection and self-awareness in the practice of any belief system. Ethical principles and humility must anchor interpretations, ensuring that spiritual teachings inspire unity, compassion, and a shared sense of purpose. Ultimately, the strength of such concepts lies not in their ability to elevate one particular group above others, but in their universality, in their capacity to foster accountability, mutual respect, and a deeper connection to the greater good.



# Chapter IX

## Humility and power

Humility has a contradictory or even paradoxical relationship with power. Power often entails authority and domination, whereas humility is characterized by modesty and the recognition of one's own limits. Exercising power can lead to pride and the abuse of authority, moving one away from the humility needed for ethical governance. However, humility enables one to recognize that power is a temporary responsibility entrusted to serve the common good, not a personal privilege. Thus, humility in the exercise of power promotes listening, collaboration, and selfless service, helping to avoid authoritarian excesses and making it, in a certain way, more effective. This paradox underlines that authentic power flourishes when exercised with humility, transforming authority into service and personal ambition into devotion to the common good. In this way, true humility can strengthen a person's power or influence, even though it involves renouncing self-importance, authority, or control.

Let us examine how this process unfolds.

Humility involves embracing vulnerability, admitting mistakes, and being open to learning, which can seem like “weakness” in a tra-

ditional sense. However, besides the fact it allows personal education, this openness builds trust, respect, and credibility, which are powerful tools in relationships and leadership. When leaders show humility, they often gain the respect and loyalty of others, which strengthens their influence far more than a rigid or domineering approach would. Humility manifests as a commitment to serve others rather than seeking personal advancement. Paradoxically, this service-oriented attitude tends to inspire and empower others, which increases a humble person's positive impact and influence. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, who prioritized the well-being of others over personal gain, exemplify how humility can give rise to a powerful legacy and far-reaching influence.

Humble individuals don't seek to dominate others but exercise self-restraint, which ironically grants them a greater degree of control, both over themselves and over how others respond to them. By not enforcing their own agenda, humble individuals can create space for dialogue, collaboration, and the input of others. This fosters a collective strength and, ultimately, positions them as respected figures who can guide and inspire without needing to impose.

Humility involves self-awareness and the ability to see one's own limitations, which paradoxically strengthens one's internal power. A humble person is more likely to learn from feedback, adapt to challenges, and grow over time, building a resilience that adds to their power. This personal growth often creates a quiet, steady power, a self-confidence that does not rely on external validation or displays of superiority.

Humility allows a person to lift others up, share credit, and acknowledge the contributions of others without feeling diminished. This approach earns trust, loyalty, and admiration, which increases

the humble person's influence. People are more willing to follow or support someone who genuinely values them and recognizes their contributions, creating a powerful bond and a strong support network. Thus, humility paradoxically amplifies power by forgoing the need for it. Humble people aren't seeking to control or dominate, yet they often end up with greater influence precisely because they inspire trust, empower others, and build connections grounded in authenticity and respect. Rather than wielding power over others, they create a collaborative, cooperative dynamic that is, in many ways, a far more potent form of power.

Humility has been used historically as a means to gain or solidify power. While genuine humility can enhance one's influence naturally, there have also been cases where a display of humility, sometimes genuine, sometimes calculated, has been employed as a strategic tool to gain authority, support, or loyalty. Let us examine different ways in which humility can be used to take or consolidate power.

Leaders throughout history have sometimes adopted humble appearances or behaviors to build trust among their followers, especially in societies that value humility as a virtue. By demagogically presenting themselves as "one of the people," leaders appear approachable and relatable, which can engender trust and loyalty. Thus, in certain monarchies, rulers would emphasize their humble origins or self-sacrifice for the people to strengthen their legitimacy and moral authority.

For example, Augustus, the first Roman Emperor (27 BCE–14 CE), who presented himself as a servant of the Roman people rather than as a monarch with absolute power. He emphasized his modest beginnings and portrayed himself as a "restorer of the Republic." He highlighted his willingness to forgo personal power for the good of

Rome. For example, he claimed to have "restored the Republic" by stepping back from absolute authority, even though he maintained significant power through the principate system. By framing himself as a humble servant of Rome who prioritized the welfare of its citizens, Augustus consolidated his legitimacy and created an enduring image as the "father" of the Roman state.

Or emperor Meiji of Japan (1852–1912), who presided over the country's rapid modernization, inaugurating the Meiji Restoration, a period of profound social and political change that witnessed Japan's transformation from an isolationist, feudal state to an industrialized world power. While he descended from a divine imperial line, he emphasized his alignment with the people by showcasing his austere lifestyle, exposing his long hours dedicated to governance, while his symbolic leadership of modernization efforts resonated with both elites and commoners. By presenting himself as both a modernizer and a traditional, selfless ruler, Meiji secured his position as a unifying figure during Japan's turbulent transformation.

Feigned humility can be used to disarm potential rivals. By downplaying one's ambitions or strengths, a person can avoid threatening others and prevent opposition from forming. Historical figures have used this tactic to enter positions of power under the radar, only to reveal their true ambitions later. A display of humility can also soften the public's perception, creating an impression of modesty while consolidating influence quietly.

For example, Napoleon Bonaparte, French emperor (1769 - 1821). After the French Revolution, he portrayed himself as a servant of the Republic and emphasized his modest Corsican origins to gain favor with the revolutionary government and the French people. He took on titles like "First Consul," suggesting that he was simply a

steward of the Republic. He also presented his military successes as victories for France rather than personal achievements. Once he secured enough power, Napoleon abandoned the pretense of humility. In 1804, he crowned himself Emperor of the French, consolidating absolute authority in a manner far from the egalitarian ideals he initially championed.

Or Julius Caesar, Roman emperor (100 BC, 44 BC). Early in his political career, he presented himself as a champion of the common people and downplayed his ambitions to gain the trust of the Roman Senate and aristocracy. He aligned himself with populist causes and took on roles that seemed non-threatening, such as his early military postings and the position of Pontifex Maximus, which had more religious than political connotations at the time. By presenting himself as modest and cooperative, Caesar avoided alarming his political rivals. However, once he gained sufficient power through his military campaigns and the support of the people, he revealed his true ambitions, leading to his appointment as dictator for life.

Or Tokugawa Ieyasu Japanese Shogun (1543 - 1616). During Japan's Sengoku period, he carefully navigated a treacherous political environment filled with ambitious warlords. He aligned himself with more powerful figures, such as Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, presenting himself as a loyal subordinate. He avoided showing overt ambition while quietly building his own power base in the background. By the time his rivals recognized his true intentions, it was too late. Ieyasu consolidated power after diverse battles he established the Tokugawa Shogunate, which ruled Japan for over 250 years.

Leaders have often highlighted their humble beginnings as a way to justify their rise to power and align themselves with the common people. This approach allows them to frame their ascent as a result of

merit or service rather than privilege or ambition, appealing to those who respect hard work and self-made success. By emphasizing humble roots, leaders can appeal to a wide base, gaining popular support and moral legitimacy. In the same way, many religious leaders have used humility to consolidate spiritual or moral authority, proclaiming vows of poverty or adopting ascetic lifestyles. This approach can create a strong public image of dedication and sacrifice, which can be very persuasive. Figures like Mahatma Gandhi and other spiritual leaders, while rather genuinely humble, were aware that their humility and modest way of life increased their influence and moral authority. Similarly, Christian and Buddhist monastic traditions often attracted followers by emphasizing humble service, which simultaneously created large networks of influence.

History provides examples of religious leaders who used humility or the appearance of poverty and asceticism to consolidate spiritual or moral authority, but whose actions or later revelations suggested that their humility was not genuine.

For example, Grigori Rasputin (Russia, 1869 - 1916), who rose to influence in the Russian court by presenting himself as a humble and devout mystic with miraculous healing powers. He wore simple peasant clothing, emphasizing his rural origins and piety, which endeared him to Tsarina Alexandra. He portrayed himself as a selfless servant of God and the Romanov family. Behind the scenes, Rasputin led a controversial lifestyle, indulging in alcohol and alleged debauchery, which contradicted his public image of humility and devotion. His influence over the royal family ultimately contributed to public mistrust and the downfall of the monarchy.

Or Girolamo Savonarola (Italy, 1452 - 1498), a Dominican friar in Florence who preached vehemently against corruption, luxury, and

moral decay, calling for repentance and simplicity. He took vows of poverty and led public burnings of luxury goods and artworks, like the "Bonfire of the Vanities", presenting himself as a champion of moral purity. While his initial message was rooted in genuine reform, he wielded immense political power and became increasingly authoritarian. His enforcement of religious strictness alienated many, and his downfall exposed the contradiction between his professed humility and his quest for control over Florence.

Jim Jones (United States, 1931 - 1978). He founded and led the Peoples Temple church, where he emphasized racial equality, communal living, and helping the poor, projecting an image of humility and social justice. He lived modestly early in his ministry, creating a persona of selflessness and commitment to the downtrodden, which attracted thousands of followers. Over time, he exhibited authoritarian control over his followers, amassed personal power, and lived luxuriously in secret. The ultimate tragedy at Jonestown, mass suicide and murder, revealed the extent to which his public image was a facade for manipulation and control.

These diverse examples share several common characteristics. Strategic humility, public displays of simplicity or asceticism used to gain trust, influence, and moral authority. Behind the scenes, actions which contradict the humble public image, revealing motives of control, power, or self-indulgence. In each case, the discrepancy between their image and reality eventually led to disillusionment, scandal, or their downfall.

In certain social environments, expressing humility has been a survival strategy, allowing people to gain power while avoiding the appearance of ambition. In ancient courts, for example, officials and ministers might feign humility to avoid appearing as rivals to the ruler.

This behavior allowed them to consolidate influence subtly without drawing suspicion, often enabling them to accumulate power without facing backlash. Military strategists and politicians have sometimes used displays of humility to appear unassuming or weak, lulling their opponents into a false sense of security. By appearing humble or submissive, leaders and generals have been able to gain strategic advantage, waiting for the opportune moment to assert power. This tactic has been noted throughout history, from Sun Tzu's "Art of War" to Machiavelli's "The Prince", where humility is seen as a means to gain leverage over opponents.

Therefore, humility, whether genuine or calculated, has frequently been used as a strategic tool to gain influence, build alliances, and solidify power. While true humility involves a genuine modesty and openness, history shows that the appearance of humility can be an effective way to navigate power structures, win trust, and position oneself advantageously, sometimes in ways that diverge from true humility. A common corporate strategy when it comes to pleasing the boss.

#### *Historical examples*

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### **China**

**"Legalist inside, Confucianist outside"** The Chinese have a saying "Legalist inside, Confucianist outside", which denounces a behavior where humility and other socially valued traits are displayed outwardly to influence or control others or society strategically. In this phrase, the "external confucianism" represents the appearance of virtues like humility, respect, and justice, which align with Confucian



ideals of moral conduct and societal order. However, the “Legalist inside” reveals a pragmatic, rather calculating, internal disposition associated with “Legalism”, a philosophy that emphasizes strict rules, control, power, and harsh measures taken to maintain order and authority. In this context, humility is promoted not as a true self-reflection and proper attitude but as a strategic tool to manage relationships, maintain influence, promote obedience, or avoid conflict. By projecting a humble or agreeable demeanor, a person can gain trust, reduce opposition, or gain some strategic advantage through holding a moral high ground. However, the underlying motivation is not aligned with a genuine Confucian desire for virtue but with a Legalist’s intent to achieve control or compliance. So, this saying can be interpreted as a recommendation to present oneself humbly or virtuously, not for the sake of genuine humility, but as a tool for manipulation or achieving one’s goals, highlighting the complex interplay between authentic virtue and calculated behavior in human relationships.

The phrase also subtly encourages the individual to adopt humility or submissiveness as a means of fulfilling his ambition. By presenting oneself with a Confucian exterior, emphasizing virtues like humility, respect, and social harmony, a leader or authority figure sets an example that implicitly urges others to adopt a similar, artificial and obedient stance. This aligns with the Confucian ideal of modeling virtue to inspire followers, but under the “Legalist inside” approach, the ultimate aim is not in fact moral alignment but control. In this sense, the saying serves as a tool of indirect influence. It uses a show of humility and virtue to encourage others to behave similarly, fostering an environment where people are less likely to challenge authority. By setting a standard of deference and self-restraint, the leader cultivates an atmosphere where people internalize and willingly accept a

subordinate and servile role. This can be an effective way to maintain social order without appearing coercive, as individuals feel they are upholding a noble, virtuous standard rather than simply submitting to power. Thus, this approach does not simply manipulate perception but also shapes behavior, inviting people to adopt humility for themselves in a way that makes them more compliant, reinforcing the authority and goals of the person employing this fallacious strategy. And we should add that such a political or social strategy is unconsciously used by parents in family dynamics, where they demand from their children patterns of behavior that they certainly do not apply to themselves.

## **Christianity**

The promotion of humility in Christianity has historically served as a powerful tool for encouraging obedience to established social and political orders. From its early years, Christian teachings emphasized humility, “educating” believers with values of modesty, self-restraint, and subordination to higher authority, both divine and earthly. These teachings were instrumental in shaping a mindset that valued submission and loyalty, which translated into servile obedience.

One of the primary ways humility was encouraged was through the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus’s own life and teachings emphasized humility, with sayings like “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5), and the instruction to “turn the other cheek” when wronged (Matthew 5:39). These teachings not only reinforced a sense of inner humility but also advocated for non-

resistance and “peace”, implicitly supporting a social hierarchy where individuals accepted their place without rebelling against authority.

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, the church’s relationship with political power evolved. With Constantine’s conversion in the 4th century, Christianity became the state religion, aligning closely with the empire’s political structure. Church leaders promoted humility as a virtue that helped believers accept their earthly roles and the suffering that goes with it, even in positions of servitude or social inferiority. The idea was that true reward lay not in earthly power or riches but in heavenly salvation. This spiritual message supported a social order where believers were encouraged to endure hardships, poverty, and even injustice without question.

Medieval Christianity took these teachings quite far. Feudal societies relied on strict hierarchies where serfs, peasants, and lower classes were subject to nobility, and nobility, in turn, was subject to the king, who was seen as God’s chosen ruler. The Church promoted humility as a spiritual discipline, particularly for the common people, urging them to accept their place and serve faithfully. Saints and martyrs were thus depicted as exemplars of humility, their lives a model for others to follow. This emphasis on humility reinforced a worldview that discouraged ambition, pride, or rebellion, which could threaten social stability.

Monastic traditions also reinforced humility’s role in obedience to authority. Monks and nuns, often seen as spiritual guides, took vows of humility, obedience, and poverty, living lives of service under the strict hierarchy of their abbots and superiors. Their example of strict obedience served as a model for laypeople, creating a culture that valued submission and viewed humility as a pathway to spiritual growth.

During the Reformation, while Protestantism challenged many authoritarian aspects of the Catholic Church, humility remained a key virtue. Leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin reinforced teachings of humility and the subordination of personal will to God's will. Although they argued against certain church authorities, they emphasized that individuals should humbly accept divine authority and, by extension, the established social order.

In more recent history, particularly in colonial contexts, Christian missionaries promoted humility among colonized populations, framing it as a pathway to spiritual enlightenment and salvation. By encouraging humility, patience, and submission, they fostered a mindset that discouraged resistance to colonial rule. This was done under the guise of civilizing and saving souls, while in reality, it also served to support the political and economic interests of the colonizers.

In sum, throughout history, Christianity's promotion of humility has often gone hand-in-hand with the promotion of obedience to social and political authority. While humility can be a powerful spiritual virtue, it has also been leveraged to support existing hierarchies and discourage resistance. By encouraging believers to focus on spiritual rewards over earthly power, ecclesiastical authorities found in humility a tool for maintaining social stability and control. This has shaped a long-standing cultural reality of humility as a virtue that, while spiritually interesting, has historically supported established rigid and arbitrary social and political structures.

# Chapter X

## Martial Arts

Martial arts, as a formalized practice of combat, self-defense and physical discipline, based on self-knowledge and self-mastery, exist in all cultures of the world, although they are often associated with East Asian traditions due to their worldwide renown and sophistication, as they integrate philosophy, spirituality and physical discipline. Some examples are Kung Fu and Tai Chi in China, Karate, Judo and Aikido in Japan, Taekwondo in Korea. These practices often emphasize inner balance, self-control, and connections to broader spiritual frameworks like Daoism, Zen Buddhism or Confucianism, which contribute to the perception of martial arts as an "oriental" concept.

In this framework, the concept of humility is fundamental. The basic paradox is that the absence of power, or absence of displaying power, is real power. Humility is an essential mindset as it enhances skill, discipline, and effectiveness, for different reasons.

**Learning** Humility allows practitioners to acknowledge that they always have more to learn. A humble martial artist respects their teachers, values feedback, and remains open to correction, knowing

that self-improvement is an ongoing and necessary process. This attitude builds skill and wisdom over time, while arrogance or overconfidence can stunt growth and lead to complacency. Similarly, in life, humility opens the door to continuous improvement, to develop understanding, which ultimately strengthens a person's capabilities and resilience.

**Adaptability** Humility involves recognizing one's own limitations and vulnerabilities, which allows one to adapt fluidly to different situations and opponents. A humble mindset makes it easier to acknowledge weaknesses and develop strategies to work around them, which enhances power in any situation. This comes in opposition to rigidity, arrogance or stubbornness, as a refusal to change, adjust, or accommodate to new circumstances, through believing one's abilities or strategies are infallible. Thus humility and adaptability are strengths that foster resilience and power, while rigidity can undermine them. Similarly, in broader life contexts, humility helps people adapt to changing circumstances and accept constructive criticism, making them more versatile and resilient in the face of challenges.

**Self-control** A fundamental principle in martial arts is to avoid unnecessary conflict and to use force only when necessary. Humility tempers the person's desire for domination, allowing practitioners to remain calm and patient, and avoid unnecessary aggression. This restraint gives them control over the situation, a quiet power that is often more effective than brute force. Likewise, humility in other areas of life allows one to manage emotions, make measured decisions, and exercise patience, qualities that build real influence and authority over time.

**Yielding** In arts like Aikido and Judo, one learns to harness and redirect the opponent's force rather than resisting it head-on. This technique requires a humble mindset, as the practitioner must learn to yield rather than impose their own strength, remaining flexible and centered rather than rigid. Humility here is a form of power: by not relying solely on one's own strength, the fighter gains a strategic advantage. In a way, we can use the opponent's force against them. Similarly, in life, humility allows individuals to respond to challenges and opposition with adaptability and calm, often using the energy of the situation to their advantage rather than expending energy in conflicts. This is contrary to aggressivity and arrogance, where we primarily want to display our personal power, a rather inefficient attitude, wasteful and counterproductive.

**Respect** Humility fosters respect for others, granting value to others, which is central to the ethos of martial arts. In traditional dojos, students bow to each other and to their instructors, showing reverence and appreciation. This mutual respect and humility create a strong bond and trust among practitioners, allowing them to support and learn from each other, rather than competing, even in a fight. In life, humility similarly builds stronger, more cooperative relationships, as others feel valued, respected, and heard. This network of respect is a quiet yet powerful form of influence and authority, as it establishes a reputation of integrity and fosters loyalty, building stronger human relations.

**Self-confidence** In martial arts, the true power of a practitioner is often quiet and reserved, without need for external display. One should have inner strength that speaks for itself, without "flashy" demonstra-

tions or boastfulness. This inner calm and confidence create a more formidable presence, as their skill is grounded in self-awareness and trust rather than showmanship. In other areas, humility cultivates an inner strength that is self-assured, as it doesn't rely on external validation or attention. This calm, steady power proves far more enduring and influential than displays of arrogance or pride.

Therefore humility serves as the foundation for lasting power. It is a source of strength because it fosters adaptability, self-development, control, respect, and resilience, qualities that make a person formidable and effective. Just as a martial artist harnesses humility to become a master of their art, a person who embraces humility in life wields a kind of power that is both subtle and profound, grounded in self-knowledge and respect for others.

Here are various notes about the relation between martial art and humility.

**Flexibility** The word judo contains the prefix *ju*, which indicates the principle of "gentleness" or "flexibility", which includes yielding to an opponent's force and using their momentum against them. Humility is needed to resist the impulse to overpower an opponent directly and instead adapt to their movements. Aikido shares a similar approach, as it focuses on harmonizing with the opponent's energy and redirecting it, rather than opposing it. A humble mindset enables practitioners to remain open and flexible, qualities that are essential to perform these techniques effectively.

**Experience** For the beginner, humility is important to receive guidance from a more advanced student. "I do not know, but he knows, so I observe and try to emulate". As well, if one is advanced, he should



accept and enjoy practicing with a beginner and not look down on them, as he was once a beginner, and without practicing with more advanced partners at the time, he would not be at the level he is now. Although if he wants to improve, he should be looking for more advanced practitioners and not fear them. It is quite challenging to practice with beginners, as one will not be able to apply as such the technique he knows to a beginner, so he is forced to adapt his gestures to this partner. This can lead to frustration, making humility essential for dealing with it effectively. Furthermore, one is not as good as he thought, hence the need to go back to basics, or find other strategies to make the technique work. Often, experienced instructors will state that “the students are my teacher”. This is because through the resistances and difficulties of the students, one can learn where to assess his teaching, and their mistakes will show the teacher’s weak points. Ironically, if students make a weird gesture, they probably copied it from their teachers, even if in a caricatural way.

**Restraint** Many martial arts have evolved into mere sports, deprived of the spiritual dimension of the practice. But those who have maintained this tradition display specific behaviors. For example, one is to refrain from exulting when winning. It doesn’t mean you should not be “happy”, but it means you should not rejoice in public, celebration should happen “behind closed doors”, because you want to avoid humiliating your opponent. By acting in this fashion, you recognise the effort and the suffering your opponent has endured to get there, as they are identical to the efforts and suffering you went through and you most likely will go through again. To recognise the other means to recognise yourself.

It also brings the awareness that maybe you won by chance, as circumstances and vagaries play a significant role in the events of the world and in any victory.

Boastfulness causes carelessness, and this distraction might be the origin of our next defeat. Humility helps us stay focused and attentive, the “alert” level should never drop. There might always be something unexpected, at any given point you might face the unknown or the unpredictable. Such a principle serves as a reminder that one is limited and finite in a world that is unlimited and infinite.

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*Japanese martial arts*

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Humility kenkyo plays an essential role in the practice of Japanese martial arts, as optimal progress in learning cannot occur without a certain level of moderation in one’s self-assessment. Recognizing one’s own limitations and understanding that the path to mastery is an endless process enables the practitioner to approach the art with an open mindset, receptive to both themselves and others. Arrogance and vanity, on the other hand, act as barriers to learning, trapping the practitioner in their certainties and fostering a self-satisfied, superior attitude. Such a mindset will quickly lead one to believe they are an expert, imagining there is little or nothing left to learn. This attitude could prove fatal in combat, as it may lead to underestimating the opponent and overestimating one’s abilities. Sooner or later, the arrogant practitioner will be confronted with their flaws and limitations, resulting in bitter disappointments. Many abandon their practice for this very reason.

The appropriate mindset for martial arts practice is conveyed through the concept of shoshin, which can be translated as “be-

ginner's mind". It is an attitude of humility that the practitioner must maintain throughout their journey, regardless of the level they achieve. According to Zen masters, in this "beginner's mind", there is no belief of having "achieved the level." All egocentric thoughts limit our expansive mind. When we let go of the idea of achievement and the notion of self, we become true beginners. Only then can we truly learn something. To be humble also means being able to recognize the value of others, whether they are instructors or fellow students. This fosters an environment of mutual support and respect, where everyone can progress at their own pace. The competition is more internal, against oneself, than external, against others, who are partners without whom no progress would be possible.

Humility also stems from the fact that beginners are not yet "moulded" into the technique, they are still "pure", and in a free expression exercise like sparring, they will react instinctively and unconventionally, a behavior which can confuse the expert, for whom hyper-specialization has potentially become a problem. They are no longer accustomed to anything that falls outside the framework they have mastered. What is more, many high-ranking fighters may be technically proficient, but they lack the instinct and spirit of the fighter, and when faced with a beginner who may be at a technical disadvantage but has that instinct, they may not emerge victorious from a confrontation. This observation leads to humility, to the recognition that no-one should be underestimated, even a complete novice.

Humility can thus be seen as a source of strength in both being and action, as it brings clarity of mind. It allows one to perceive things more objectively. By acknowledging their limits and imperfections, an individual is better prepared to face situations realistically, which can lead to wiser decisions. A humble person is also more receptive

to feedback and advice. This ability to continuously learn enhances their skills and effectiveness in their actions. Finally, humility helps in managing failures and facing challenges. Humble individuals are often more resilient, as they view obstacles as opportunities for growth rather than as threats or humiliations.

*Condition and Resultant*

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Humility is both a condition for progression and effectiveness in action, and also a natural consequence of sincere practice. Indeed, the diligent practitioner who engages wholeheartedly in exercises quickly understands that obstacles, mistakes, and defeats, especially in competitive combat, are inevitable stages. It is impossible to emerge victorious from every confrontation. The desire to win gradually fades as the practitioner progresses, as they come to internalize, through experience, the futility and randomness of victory. Paradoxically, as with love or happiness, it is by not seeking to dominate or to win that one achieves victory in combat. In this respect, progress in managing one's emotions is essential.

At the beginning of their training, the martial arts practitioner is beset by a series of emotions whose control poses a significant challenge. They feel fear, anger, frustration, and surprise in turn, often allowing these emotions to dominate them. For instance, they experience fear that inhibits or even paralyzes, or anger that often turns into rage, pushing them into action but making their behavior highly predictable, thus providing the opponent with an opportunity to easily counter the attack. Acquiring a "clear mind," free of any desire, and whose stability is no longer disturbed by the flow of emotions passing through it, is the key to fighting effectively. For the mind will then be fully receptive to its surroundings, perceiving even the slightest

gesture of the opponent and optimizing the chances of appropriate responses.

By multiplying confrontations, provided they are uncompromising, the practitioner will sooner or later be forced to recognise that the line between victory and defeat, between life and death on a battlefield, is sometimes exceedingly thin. "The only fight I am sure to win is the one I do not engage in.", say the Japanese. This realization compels humility and leads to the cultivation of this virtue, recognising that it is both a condition for progression and the natural and necessary outcome of authentic practice.

*The Art of war*

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Humility plays an important role in the oriental art of war, a tradition influenced by Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. This is evident, for example, in the classic text "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu, where humility is linked to concepts of strategy, wisdom, and prudence.

In this work, humility is not explicitly mentioned as a moral virtue, but it is implied in several strategic principles, such as prudence and strategic modesty. Sun Tzu advises feigning weakness to deceive the enemy and maintain an advantage, which requires a form of strategic humility, accepting not to display one's strength to deploy it more effectively at the right moment. He writes: "Appear incapable when you are ready, and weak when you are strong." Furthermore, a humble attitude encourages the recognition of the enemy's capabilities and avoids arrogance, which could lead to strategic errors. "Know your enemy and know yourself, and you will never be defeated."

Taoism, which strongly influences this work, values humility as a quality that allows one to align with natural and universal forces. It

prioritizes flexibility and adaptability, qualities that require humility in the face of the complexity and unpredictability of both war and life. To be humble is to accept that one cannot control everything and must adapt to the flow of events. “The weak overcome the strong, and the supple overcome the rigid.” Humility is linked to the suppression of ego, enabling rational and effective decisions, unclouded by pride or emotions.

Confucianism, although less focused on war, values the virtues of respect and modesty, which apply to interactions between commanders and their soldiers. Mutual respect: a humble leader inspires respect from their troops by showing consideration for their efforts, needs, and dignity. A humble attitude fosters loyalty and morale, crucial elements in any military campaign. In both peace and war, Confucius emphasizes ethical behavior. Humility helps avoid unnecessary excesses or destructive actions driven by arrogance, which is seen as a weakness that leads to fatal mistakes.

Thus, humility in the art of war is more of a strategic and philosophical quality than merely a moral virtue. It helps to avoid errors caused by arrogance or impulsiveness, aligns with Taoist principles that promote flexibility and adaptability, and cultivates respectful and harmonious relationships even in conflict. It is therefore not a sign of weakness but an essential asset for conducting war with wisdom and efficiency.

### *surfing*

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An interesting parallel can be made between martial arts and the practice of surfing, where humility is as well needed as the condition for a sound practice. When learning, one has first to recognize that the power of the ocean is immense and unpredictable, it is obvious

that we cannot overpower it. As they learn the practice, beginners must accept falling repeatedly and periodically failing to catch waves. Even experienced surfers encounter new challenges with bigger waves, different breaks, or unfamiliar conditions. As well, surfing often involves sharing the lineup with other surfers, we cannot be merely focused on ourselves. Overconfidence can lead to dangerous situations. Thus we have to humble ourselves, and this humility makes us more attentive to the context.

Surfers must adapt their techniques and approach to the conditions, rather than stubbornly sticking to preconceived strategies. They must know their limits, avoid taking unnecessary risks, and respect warnings from more experienced surfers. The unpredictability of the ocean can easily lead to frustration, as waves might not cooperate, or performance may falter. Humility helps surfers accept setbacks as part of the experience and focus on enjoying the process.

We learn that we should not pretend to impose our will and intention upon the ocean, as we should watch it carefully and try to adapt to the circumstances. In other words, we have to be passive in order to be active, as this careful scrutiny prepares us to be more in line with the larger force. Because of this “adaptation”, we can use the power of the wave to our advantage, while fighting with it would imply inevitable failure. In essence, humility in surfing is about recognizing one’s place in the larger context of nature, learning, and community, which enhances both progress in the art, work on oneself, and the joy of the sport.

Although we should mention that surfers often embody a paradoxical mix of humility and arrogance. On one hand, the ocean constantly humbles them, reminding them of their limits. On the other, certain behaviors in surf culture clash with humility by displaying egotism,

entitlement, or competitiveness. Here are a few typical surfer behaviors of this type.

Some surfers act as if they personally own a particular break, aggressively enforcing unwritten territorial rules. They try to intimidate outsiders, even resorting to verbal or physical aggression. Experienced surfers try to monopolize the best waves, disregarding etiquette and fairness, instead of waiting their turn, refusing to acknowledge others' right to the wave. They will "drop in" on someone else, which means they will intrusively take the wave the other one is riding, making him stumble or fall. They act as if they deserve more waves simply because they are better or have been surfing longer. They treat a casual session as a contest, constantly trying to outshine others, turning a communal experience into a battle for dominance. Skilled surfers express impatience or disdain for beginners, mocking them or refusing to share advice with them, forgetting that everyone starts somewhere, and the ocean is a space for learning, not for exclusion. Or they constantly brag about their achievements, such as big waves they conquered, barrels they made, etc., often in an excessive or exaggerated way. In particular, competitive surfing fuels arrogance, as surfers feel constant pressure to prove themselves.

Surfers can commonly suffer from overconfidence, often due to their intimate connection with the ocean, their physical skills, and the adrenaline-fueled nature of the sport. This hubris manifests by taking unnecessary risks, attempting waves beyond their skill level, which can lead to serious injuries or fatal accidents. They might underestimate the power of currents, tides, and wave conditions. Or refuse to retreat when the ocean signals danger, such as incoming storm or a powerful rip current. They push themselves to exhaustion, believing they can handle more than their body allows. Some inter-



mediate surfers develop an inflated sense of skill and ignore advice from veterans. They paddle into waves they cannot control or break surf rules, thinking they know best. But the main form of overconfidence comes from forgetting that the ocean is always in control, as no matter how skilled a surfer is, the ocean remains unpredictable and humbling. They commonly forget that true mastery involves humility, adaptability, and a constant awareness of one's own limitations.

# Chapter XI

## Formal Humility

### *Social obligation*

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In certain contexts or cultures, humility becomes a social obligation and can transform into a formal practice or even a façade, contradicting genuine humility. When humility is strongly or excessively valued, it is imposed as a mandatory convention, pushing individuals to adopt humble behaviors to conform without necessarily being motivated by genuine inner conviction. Humility as an formalized norm, as is the case in some asian countries, is often associated with specific codes of conduct or ritualized behaviors, such as bowing, respectful language, or forced modesty in speech. While these practices may serve as a form of “social glue”, they can also easily become meaningless automatisms. Such humility becomes more of a social performance than an authentic expression, contradicting the very idea of true humility.

This kind of cultural obligation naturally leads to ostentatious humility, a paradox in which humility is displayed to gain recognition or status, effectively turning it into a form of manipulation. For in-

stance, a person might publicly downplay their achievements in order to receive additional compliments or reinforce their image of virtue. This feigned humility becomes a strategy to win others' esteem rather than a sincere effort of self-examination or acknowledgment of one's limitations. It can even be used as a manipulative technique, where one hides his true self and aspirations behind a show of humility. The individual places his pawns, establishes alliances, seeks support, waiting for the moment when he will show his true face and openly "take power". Unless he plays this "game" eternally as a strategy, which allows him to play everyone off against each other, since he flatters everyone and becomes their "friend".

Then, when a society enforces rigid, "forced humility", individuals may feel pressured in ways that suppress their authenticity, leading to a negation of emotions and subjectivity. The constant demand to appear humble prevents people from expressing legitimate feelings of pride or frustration, from speaking what they believe to be true or important, in short, it stifles sincerity. This gap between outward appearance and inner reality generates varying levels of frustration and a sense of dissatisfaction. Paradoxically, imposed humility drives individuals further away from true humility, making them more pre-occupied with their social image than with an authentic effort at introspection and self-improvement.

Furthermore, humility is sometimes used as a tool of social control in order to maintain established hierarchies or roles, keeping individuals in a submissive posture toward authority figures. Similarly, people are discouraged from asserting their value or personal aspirations under the guise of maintaining modesty, as social pressure forces them to conform to established norms and obey the powers that be.

When humility becomes a rigid social obligation, it loses its profound meaning and turns into an “external form” that contradicts genuine humility. True humility can only be authentic when it stems from a voluntary, inner, and sincere effort, one that respects both social norms and individual freedom. For example, Confucianism’s emphasis on rituals was meant to cultivate moral character and social harmony, but over time, it devolved into rote formalities disconnected from their ethical purposes. For example, bowing and other such procedures became gestures of obligation rather than genuine respect. So the gap between the ideal and the reality led to widespread accusations of hypocrisy, where individuals outwardly performed Confucian roles but acted in self-serving ways. Confucianism was then denounced by some as oppressive and backward, associating it with feudalism and patriarchal control. Furthermore, state-led promotion of such doctrine tends to reduce it to a tool for political control, emphasizing obedience and social harmony over critical thinking and individuality.

*Formal criteria for humility*

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Let us examine some of the formal criteria to determine if a person is humble. In Asian culture, an interesting case of traditional enforced humility.

**Avoiding self-praise** “Humble” individuals refrain from boasting about their abilities or achievements. Even if they have accomplished something significant, they mention it with subtlety, perhaps attributing their success to teamwork or luck. This reflects in theory a sense of humility and restraint, rather than a desire for personal recog-

niton or showing off, and it blurs the reality of one's value, for others and for himself.

**Rejecting praise** When receiving compliments, it is common for a “humble” person to turn them down, preferably with a smile. Many people instinctively respond to praise with phrases like, “I still have a lot to work on”, or “Oh, not at all; that’s nothing.” This kind of response comes across as modest and friendly, while also serving as a way to avoid evoking jealousy from others. Of course, it is very artificial, as we can tell that the person is happy with the compliments but refuses to admit it. As well, this stifles honest appreciation of the other person, any true sharing. And when “humble” persons systematically reject the praise from others, especially when repetitive, they might feel rejected altogether when people stop praising them.

**Avoiding praise of others** Praising others should be avoided, in order not to embarrass them, as it puts them in the “spotlight”. As well, in an educational context, because we should not provoke their pride, or make them suspicious of being proud.

**Cautiousness** “Humble” people are careful not to criticize others directly or offer unsolicited advice. They are mindful when giving feedback to avoid discomfort or offense. Instead, they use polite and soft expressions, very evasive or indirect, or may choose silence. When giving advice is necessary, they make suggestions gently, using phrases like “You might want to consider this or that.” instead of explicitly pointing out flaws.

**Silence** To be “humble” means speaking less and listening more, punctuation a dialogue with smiles, nods, and silences. “Humble” individuals prefer to listen and observe rather than propose ideas or dominate conversations. They often use non-verbal responses, such as smiling or nodding, just to show they are engaged, avoiding behaviors that could make them seem overbearing or attention-seeking. This approach conveys respect for others, as it is supposed to foster a harmonious atmosphere, but it engenders a rather passive and self-suppressive attitude. One should avoid taking any risks of confrontation in a conversation.

**Acknowledging weaknesses** A “humble” person does not hide their shortcomings, quite the contrary, as they are willing to admit their limitations in appropriate situations, to exaggerate them or even to invent them. This pretended honesty makes them appear more genuine and trustworthy since it highlights a lack of arrogance. But this ostentatious behavior becomes a form of “seduction” or manipulation.

The “show” of humility is a form of hypocrisy, beside being a contradiction. For example, when someone is complimented for some particular accomplishment, they will deny their own merit, through different arguments. They will use responses that downplay their own contribution or shift credit elsewhere. For example, attributing success to others, like “I couldn’t have done it without my team.”, or “I learned so much from my mentor; it wasn’t all me.” Minimizing their skills, like “I am still learning, I have a long way to go.” or “This was actually very easy to do.” Suggesting factors beyond their control: “It was just luck.”, or “I was in the right place at the right moment.” Downplaying the value, like “It’s nothing extraordinary, I was just doing my job.”, or “I don’t deserve all that praise; it’s really

a small thing.” When people use for themselves, orally or mentally, the adjectives “humble” or “modest”, they use it as a rhetorical form to enhance the value of what they say, and of themselves: for example by adding: “In my humble opinion...”

Such a behavior is rather unhealthy, as it is very artificial and denies reality. Either it induces excessive self-deprecation, which might inadvertently undermine one’s confidence and credibility. Or actually the person does not believe what he says, as it is visible that they are rather proud of themselves. A truly humble person can be happy with their accomplishments, as humility does not mean denying or disregarding one’s achievements. Instead, humility involves maintaining a reasonable perspective, indeed recognizing the contributions of others, appreciating the factors beyond oneself that contributed to success, but still openly acknowledging one’s contribution and self contentment, and even a healthy pride.

### *Enforced humility*

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Enforced humility within a society, where individuals or groups are compelled to adopt humility through external pressures rather than personal growth or conviction, can have profound and multifaceted consequences, depending on the context and the mechanisms of enforcement.

If implemented thoughtfully, as means of personal and collective development, enforced humility, through education or cultural norms might encourage individuals to reflect on their limitations and interdependence within society, fostering a culture of mutual respect and empathy, the promotion of virtue, with rather positive or transformative consequences. Social mechanisms enforcing humility could

serve as a corrective measure to mitigate the temptation of hubris, when unchecked ambition or arrogance lead to societal harm, politically or economically. It might strengthen a sense of collective identity, which implies to prioritize communal well-being over individual achievement and competition. This leads to greater social cohesion and a focus on shared goals.

But as well, such imposition can have negative consequences.

Forced humility undermines genuine self-expression and individuality, as people conform to expectations out of fear or obligation, preoccupied with appearance, rather than an authentic sense of humility. This induces a superficial culture of compliance, where humility becomes performative, ostentatious, rather than sincere.

Societies that enforce humility risk discouraging ambition and initiative, as individuals may fear standing out or challenging norms. This stifling environment hinders progress, creativity, and innovation, leading to stagnation.

When humility is coerced, it erodes self-confidence and self-worth, particularly in individuals or groups who are continually reminded of their perceived inferiority. This dynamic perpetuates cycles of subjugation and dependence. In general, those who speak of humility, who preach it or impose it, are of course never humble. Humility easily becomes a tool of power for a clerical or political authority. The one who orders to be humble holds power and is not humble. Preaching humility can in fact conceal a kind of envy and promoting destruction, since it is all about enhancing oneself by diminishing others. Forced humility often breeds frustration and resentment, especially if it is imposed unequally or arbitrarily. This discontentment can manifest as passive resistance, social unrest, or even rebellion, destabilizing the social order.



When humility is enforced by those in power, it can entrench systemic inequalities, with the powerful using forced humility as a tool to suppress dissent and maintain control. Such institutionalized power imbalances deepen societal divides and perpetuate oppression.

Ultimately, the consequences of forced humility depend heavily on the methods and intentions behind its imposition. A society that balances humility with the promotion of personal dignity and freedom is more likely to achieve a harmonious outcome. However, where forced humility becomes a tool of oppression, the risks of alienation, systemic injustice, and societal decay are profound. For humility to have positive effects, it must ideally emerge from an organic process of self-discovery and shared values, rather than from coercion. Humility and self-assertion are both essential for a society to thrive.

Excessive insistence on formal humility induces a lack of self-confidence, what can be called the "never good enough" syndrome, for example. Such an exhortation inhibits personal initiative and self-satisfaction, as it promotes a rather anxiogenic psychology. Strangely enough, this behavior conflates with hidden ambition and perfectionism, as we can notice with parents who constantly criticize their children, as they want them to "perform better" like being at the top of the class.

Forced humility engenders a number of cognitive dissonances and conflictual tendencies. We desire praise but we feel awkward about it, even embarrassed. We have ambitions, but the cultivation of our humble image prohibits us from taking responsibility, as we do not want to act as a "leader" and look pretentious. We can even feel guilty or shameful about putting ourselves forward, to "step into the spotlight", for example to speak in public, which inhibits taking responsibility and doing our work properly. We have to be officially appointed

to an “important” position in order to act proudly, a status that can allow us to be arrogant and scornful. Another common worry is about bothering other people, we fear taking up too much of their time, often for no legitimate reason. In conversations, especially in public or group settings, “humble” people strive not to occupy too much of others’ time, to occupy the common space, or even avoid totally singularizing themselves. If they happen to speak for too long, they will usually apologize to the group by saying “Sorry for taking up everyone’s time.”, although such remarks do not stop some “humbles” from pursuing their “show”.

These behaviors clearly illustrate how humility, as a valued virtue, can be rigidly transformed into social norms, potentially creating personal challenges. For example, people might internalize behaviors like “rejecting praise” and “acknowledging one’s shortcomings” into a belief of “I’m never good enough,” leading to persistent self-dissatisfaction or self-deprecation. This mindset can make them hesitant to take on responsibilities, causing missed interesting challenges, and further reinforcing the “I’m not good enough” belief, creating a negative feedback loop.

Similarly, being overly cautious with their words can lead to a habitual suppression of self-expression, resulting in a strong conflict between one’s inner feelings and external behavior. This lack of direct communication causes misunderstandings in interactions with others. Additionally, the risk of being taken advantage of is a real concern, as humble and non-assertive individuals can become targets for exploitation. In both professional and personal settings, this might result in unequal work and rewards distribution, or unfair treatment. All these behaviors inhibit authenticity, straying away from the original intention behind humility.

*Proud humility*

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Paradoxically, “forced humility”, as it becomes artificial and false, becomes a source of pride and arrogance. People that enjoy power believe in and enjoy humility from others, since it gives them the impression of being respected or honored. And as well they can display humility as a tool of social manipulation. The usage of the “power games” of humility revolves around the social and psychological dynamics of validation and status.

Thus, Ignatius of Loyola, a spiritual and religious leader, founder of the Jesuit catholic order, a fervent promoter of humility, warned about the “pride of humility”. The main points of his practice were the following. Finding God in all things, recognizing the divine presence in everyday life and experiences. Making decisions guided by prayer, reflection, and an awareness of inner movements of the soul, positive and negative. A daily reflective prayer to review one’s day, seeking gratitude and spiritual growth. Combining contemplation with action, striving to serve others and live out faith through deeds. Developing freedom from disordered attachments in order to focus on God’s will. Ignatian spirituality is both contemplative and active, inviting individuals to deepen their relationship with God while engaging meaningfully with the world. Obviously, humility becomes an essential element of such a practice

But he addressed a paradox within spiritual growth: the danger of becoming prideful or self-righteous about one’s personal “lowering” and availability to God. Here are some of his main points. Humility is a virtue that involves recognizing one’s limitations and dependence on God or on others. However, it can become a source of pride if one starts taking excessive satisfaction in being humble. When some-

one outwardly acts modestly but internally feels superior to others because of their perceived virtue. This "false humility" undermines the true essence of humility. The "pride of humility" occurs when someone becomes overly focused on demonstrating humility, inadvertently feeding what he calls their "self-love", a narcissistic concept. They may seek recognition for their modesty or feel morally superior to others who appear less humble. Loyola emphasized that humility should lead to a deeper relationship with God and others, not become a performance or a badge of honor. Genuine humility is self-effacing and aims at service, not self-congratulation. He highlights the need for self-awareness and vigilance. Even in striving for humility, individuals must guard against inner subtle tendencies to distort and corrupt their own intentions.

#### *False Humility*

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False humility is the display of modesty or self-deprecation that is not entirely genuine. It involves downplaying one's accomplishments while subtly drawing attention to them. Pretending to defer to others while maintaining an inner sense of superiority, more or less visible. While false humility can be seen as manipulative or insincere, it often has a socially rewarding effect.

False humility is "useful" and "effective". When someone downplays their own importance or achievements, it can give the listener or observer the impression that they are being elevated in importance or status, it pleasantly validates them. This flattering dynamic makes people feel respected, honored, or even superior in the interaction. A typical example, almost obligatory, is the famous Hollywood rewards remark, where the successful individual will say, "I owe it all to my

team”, which makes team members feel uniquely valued and essential, and make them more available.

False humility can create the illusion of equality in hierarchical relationships. A person in a higher position, a leader, expert, professor or celebrity, may exhibit humility, making others feel closer to them or even more powerful by comparison. A classical scholar’s remark of this type is “I still have a lot to learn”, or “Tell me if I am wrong”, giving students or peers the impression of intellectual parity.

Many cultures value modesty and discourage overt displays of pride or arrogance. When someone demonstrates false humility, it aligns with these cultural expectations, creating a comfortable social interaction that reinforces shared norms. People are more likely to accept or admire or accept someone who appears humble, even if the humility is contrived. This happens a lot in the workplace, for example in order to be appreciated by the authorities, to be promoted or to get a raise. Of course, honesty is not welcome, since bosses, like everyone else, tend to be insecure and narcissistic. Obsequiousness and sycophancy are often the rules of the game.

Recipients of false humility may experience “emotional gratification” because they feel the person is acknowledging their worth or contributions, even if only superficially. The mere fact of being mentioned can boost self-esteem and foster a positive impression of the relationship. False humility influences relationships, it creates an appealing image. It helps the person projecting it to seem approachable, likable, or relatable. This can make others feel more comfortable and valued in their presence. People often gravitate toward those who seem humble, as it gives them a sense of being appreciated and acknowledged, respected or honored. But the irony is that false humility allows individuals to maintain their superior status while softening

its impact, making their achievements or position less threatening to others, so they can be more easily recognized, or obtain power

When people use false humility to gain favor or influence, it creates an asymmetric dynamic, where the recipient feels indebted or overly impressed without realizing the insincerity behind the gesture. As well, false humility prevents genuine, open communication by maintaining appearances rather than fostering authentic connection. Truthfulness becomes tacitly banned. But over time, false humility often will be perceived as disingenuous, leading to distrust or cynicism, when people realize they are being manipulated or patronized. But it works for a while, because insecurity and need for reassurance are popular feelings.

False humility is effective because it plays on universal human needs for validation, equality, and respect. People enjoy the impression of being honored or respected, even when the humility shown to them is not entirely sincere, when they do not really “buy it”. We like to believe it. However, while it can create short-term social harmony, false humility risks eroding trust and authenticity in relationships if the underlying motives are exposed, which always happens in the end. True humility, grounded in genuine respect for others, remains the more enduring and meaningful approach.

#### *Humility and self-satisfaction*

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Often, humility is thought about in a context of sacrifice, a giving up something “pleasurable”, as censoring ourselves. It has a rather sad connotation. Some may believe that humility requires downplaying or dismissing one’s achievements. In reality, this is false humility, which can lead to frustration or self-denial rather than happiness. Humility

should not be confused with low self-esteem or a lack of confidence. A humble person can acknowledge their value and accomplishments without becoming egotistical.

Here are some thoughts to show how humility and happiness can very well coexist.

A humble person can feel proud of their accomplishments without becoming arrogant or overly self-centered. They understand that achievements reflect effort, skill, and perhaps some external circumstances, such as support from others or favorable opportunities. They attribute part of their success to mentors, collaborators, diverse circumstances or external powers, which allows them to enjoy their accomplishments while staying grounded. Paradoxically, it can be called “humble pride”, a collaborative, non-competitive form of pride.

Humility is often paired with gratitude, an attitude which enhances the ability to feel joy. A humble person acknowledges the help, inspiration, or resources they received, which fosters a deeper and more enduring form of happiness. This can include a sense of providence, or serendipity, even a positive sense of fate.

Humility helps individuals avoid undue comparison with others. Rather than seeking validation by surpassing others, they take satisfaction in the intrinsic value of their accomplishments, which leads to a more genuine and sustainable happiness. Comparison is not reason, as Pascal wrote, as comparison can always be used unconsciously to feed a confirmation bias, depending on the elements of the comparison, to justify our “greatness” or our “badness”. And it induces an anxiogenic competitive scheme, as well as a painful envy. And we learn to rejoice from others’ qualities and accomplishments, enlarging our perspective and source of joy.

For a humble person, accomplishments are often seen as steps in personal growth or contributions to a greater purpose, rather than as trophies for self-glorification. This perspective allows them to feel fulfilled without attaching their worth solely to external causes, or to luck, a very fragile and exogenous attitude, since we are always at the mercy of frustrating setbacks.

A humble person can aspire to do better while being content with what they have already achieved. This capacity of acceptance prevents the restlessness or dissatisfaction often associated with unchecked ambition and greed, always in want.

Humble people share their success with others, either by acknowledging their contributions or by using their accomplishments to uplift others. This creates a sense of purpose and community, which enhances happiness as it fosters connection, belonging, fruitful exchanges, and a shared sense of meaning in life.

Humility reduces the pressure to constantly prove oneself, as a humble person derives their sense of worth from intrinsic values rather than external validation. This security allows them to enjoy their accomplishments without fear of losing status or recognition, a more peaceful attitude.

A humble person finds happiness in devoting themselves to others, moving from a competitive to a collaborative vision. Indeed, by helping others and sharing their resources, they develop a sense of belonging and a sincere, generous relationship. This altruistic commitment enables her to transcend her own individuality, enrich her relationships and experience the gratitude of those she supports. Thus, by focusing on the well-being of others rather than the search for personal validation, she cultivates a deep and lasting joy, a true reflection of her inner balance and ability to realize herself through service.



Thus a humble person can absolutely be happy with their accomplishments, as humility enhances the quality of that satisfaction by rooting it in gratitude, self-awareness, and connection to others. Their joy is less tied to external validation and more to the meaningfulness of their achievements and their contributions to a greater good. Humility allows for an appropriate and deeply fulfilling sense of plenitude.

# Chapter XII

## Learning humility

The idea of “deciding to be humble” or “teaching humility” may sound strange as such, since humility is often seen as something innate or arising naturally, rather than as a conscious deliberate choice.

It is hard to imagine why someone would suddenly decide to become humble, unless maybe in the context of a religious conversion, or as a consequence of a strong experience, where humility is part of the “transformation”. However, many qualities that we associate with humility, that have to do with our character as well, like patience or empathy, can be learned through conscious intention and effort. Therefore, one way this “learning” or even this “teaching” of humility can be realized, is by committing to certain behaviors, like listening without hasty judgment, giving others credit, and acknowledging our own limitations without self-deprecation. Choosing humility therefore involves actively deciding to adopt a more objective view of oneself, to listen to others, to accept our limitations, and to resist the urge to seek constant validation or superiority. So we can decide to be humble, although it sounds strange, as humility can be thought of as an acquired “second nature”, as a quality that is devel-

oped gradually through self-reflection and life experience. Practicing humility intentionally until it becomes a natural part of one's character, as is often taught in religious initiations. In this sense, humility becomes both a mindset and a practice. And making a conscious decision to be humble, in spite of the paradoxical aspect we have described earlier, can be the first step in cultivating this virtue more deeply.

But humility is indeed more of a byproduct, by choosing to engage in actions or attitudes that foster it, rather than something we decide on directly. By choosing to listen to others, to remain open to new perspectives, to acknowledge our limitations, or to give credit where it's due, humility naturally emerges as a consequence of these behaviors. In this way, humility is the "result" of a series of choices that involve self-awareness, openness, and empathy. We don't wake up and directly choose "to be humble," but we can choose actions and attitudes, like respecting others' contributions or being receptive to feedback, that gradually cultivate humility. It becomes less of a conscious, standalone decision and more of an outcome of how we approach ourselves and others. Humility grows indirectly, through the choices we make to act thoughtfully and respectfully, rather than through a direct decision to "be humble." This makes humility more authentic and sustainable, as it reflects genuine growth rather than a forced attitude.

Deciding directly to "be humble" can indeed lead to an artificial or performative version of humility, where the focus is more about "appearing" humble, rather than genuinely embodying it. This can result in a kind of humility that feels formal, forced, or even self-conscious, as the person may be more concerned with the image they project than with true openness or self-awareness. And this is what happens a lot in cultures where humility is viewed as an obligation.

When humility is cultivated indirectly, by choosing to listen, to respect others' viewpoints, or to acknowledge one's limitations, it feels more natural and authentic. This gradual approach allows humility to develop as a genuine quality, integrated into one's character, rather than as a display or something that needs to be managed or presented. It is not about showing one's credentials or paying lip service to "official" humble behavior. In essence, authentic humility flows from consistent, sincere actions and attitudes that prioritize learning, empathy, and respect. It is less about "being humble" in a formal sense and more about fostering a mindset that sees the value in others and recognizes one's place within a larger context. This indirect approach makes humility a lived experience rather than a superficial stance.

Therefore, telling someone directly to "be more humble" can indeed come across as strange or even counterproductive. Humility is not something that can be simply willed into existence by command; it is a quality that emerges from introspection, self-awareness, and a genuine openness to others, a real interest for them. When we tell someone to "be more humble," it often sounds vague or even judgmental because it doesn't provide clear guidance on what specific attitudes or behaviors might foster humility. A more effective approach would be to encourage behaviors or attitudes that cultivate humility. For example, instead of saying "be more humble," one might suggest, "try listening more carefully to others' perspectives", "consider the ways others have contributed" or "Do you see your problem?". These kinds of suggestions focus on actions that, when practiced sincerely, lead to a natural growth in humility. In short, humility is best developed as a byproduct of specific choices and attitudes. Directly commanding humility risks reducing it to a superficial display rather than allowing it to grow organically through authentic, self-reflective actions.

Furthermore, when we try to push someone to “be humble” directly, it often risks crossing into humiliation rather than fostering true humility. This happens because forcing humility can come off as highlighting or even exaggerating someone’s flaws or limitations, which can feel belittling rather than encouraging. The person may feel exposed or shamed rather than genuinely supported in developing a balanced self-view. Humility, when authentically cultivated, is a result of personal insight and reflection, not external pressure. Trying to impose humility externally, by pointing out someone’s mistakes or emphasizing where they need to “come down a notch”, can backfire by making them defensive or resentful. Rather than feeling motivated to self-reflect, they may feel humiliated, leading to a reaction of shame or resistance instead of a natural inclination toward humility. A better approach to fostering humility is to create an environment where self-reflection is encouraged and supported. Encouraging open-mindedness, empathy, and self-awareness allows humility to emerge on its own terms, rather than being forced through external criticism or pressure.

Humiliation is the experience of feeling degraded, shamed, or diminished in self-worth, as a result of an action or remark that makes someone feel inferior or exposed. It involves a deep sense of embarrassment or loss of dignity, typically brought about when someone’s weaknesses, mistakes, or vulnerabilities are highlighted, especially in a way that makes them feel powerless, ashamed, or “less than” others. Thus can occur in various contexts. Public shaming, when a person is embarrassed or criticized in front of others, they may feel humiliated due to the loss of face or social standing. Intimidation or demeaning treatment, when being treated with disrespect, such as through mocking, belittling comments, or unfair comparisons, which

can cause someone to feel humiliated by stripping away their sense of self-worth. Violation of personal boundaries, with actions that disregard someone's dignity or personal boundaries, making them feel exposed or vulnerable. Unlike humility, which is a voluntary and self-accepted recognition of one's limitations, humiliation is imposed externally and typically triggers feelings of resentment, shame, or anger rather than self-growth or acceptance. But this is often what happens, for example when parents insist on teaching humility to their children "artificially", by instilling shame or punishing in an excessive way. Such a behavior can induce resentment, self-doubt, and feelings of inadequacy in the child, as the "lesson of humility" becomes intertwined with a sense of being undervalued or demeaned. Instead of fostering genuine self-awareness, this approach risks creating emotional wounds that hinder confidence and growth.

Humility seems to be the only virtue we cannot practice directly, but is a result of others. In this sense, humility is indeed unique among virtues as it is the outcome of practicing other qualities rather than something we can pursue directly. While we can practice kindness, honesty, or patience in specific, intentional ways, humility tends to arise indirectly as we engage in these other virtues. Here are some of the deliberate actions we can engage into in order to develop such a quality.

Listening carefully to others cultivates humility by reminding us of the value of perspectives other than ours, the interest of multiplicity.

Being open to external feedback and using it for self-reflection makes us more aware of our own limitations and areas for growth, naturally fostering a humble attitude. Other's views on oneself are often more objective and truthful than our own.

Practicing empathy and compassion leads us to focus on others' needs, gradually shifting the focus away from ourselves, which is a key aspect of humility.

Acknowledging, appreciating and respecting others' strengths and contributions can remind us that our own abilities are part of a broader, shared human experience, keeping us grounded in reality.

In this sense, humility is more of a byproduct, a state of mind that develops as we engage sincerely with values like honesty, respect, and empathy, and openness of mind. Trying to "practice humility" directly comes off as self-conscious or performative. True humility is subtle and unforced; it's a natural inclination that emerges when we genuinely commit to seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole and recognize that everyone, including ourselves, has both strengths and limitations.

Humiliating someone does not make one truly humble. In fact, humiliation and humility are fundamentally different experiences, and often have opposing effects on a person's mindset and self-perception. When someone is humiliated, they are made to feel small, ashamed, or inferior in a painful and degrading way. This experience tends to foster resentment, defensiveness, or deep insecurity rather than genuine humility. Humiliation attacks a person's dignity and self-worth, making them feel vulnerable or powerless, which can lead to bitterness, anger, or a desire to regain a sense of pride or control. These reactions move a person further from humility, as they become pre-occupied with emotionally restoring their self-esteem or dignity.

True humility, on the other hand, comes from a place of self-acceptance and self-awareness. It involves recognizing one's own limitations and strengths without feeling threatened or diminished by them. Humility is an internal quality that arises from reflection,

openness to feedback, and a willingness to respect others' perspectives. Unlike humiliation, which is imposed externally and is painful, humility grows naturally as a result of positive, often voluntary, experiences of learning, growth, and connection with others. Humiliation feeds a sense of comparison, with competition and envy, even victimhood. It does not incite us to view others positively and our relation to them. Humiliation does not lead to humility; it usually leads to pain, defensiveness, or resentment. True humility can only be cultivated through respectful, supportive, and self-reflective experiences that help a person see themselves in a balanced, grounded way.

Indeed, some people can, in certain situations, learn a lesson and grow more humble after experiencing humiliation. However, this outcome depends on many factors, including the person's resilience, level of self-reflection, and the way they process the experience. While humiliation itself is typically painful and degrading, some individuals may choose to reflect deeply on the experience, using it as an opportunity for growth. This reflection can sometimes lead to a type of humility grounded in self-awareness and empathy. For example, someone who has been humiliated might come to understand the impact of their own actions on others or recognize a previously unseen flaw. This can open them up to being more humble, empathetic, or careful in their behavior toward others. However, this outcome is not guaranteed, as humiliation can just as easily lead to defensiveness, resentment, or a desire to prove oneself, which do not foster true humility.

For a humbling lesson to arise from humiliation, it typically requires:

Self-reflection, as the person needs to process the experience thoughtfully, considering how they can grow from it without fixating on the shame.



Support and guidance, as positive feedback, encouragement, or a compassionate perspective from others can help them reframe the experience constructively.

Resilience, as a resilient person may be able to integrate a painful experience into their understanding of themselves without being emotionally overwhelmed by it.

So while it is possible for someone to grow more humble after being humiliated, it's not the humiliation itself that fosters humility. Instead, it's the individual's choice to reflect, learn, and grow from the experience that ultimately leads to genuine humility.

An interesting hypothesis about humiliation is the idea that "proud people are the ones that get humiliated", as arrogance leads to downfall. In Greek mythology and tragedy, hubris (excessive pride) often leads to nemesis (retribution). Characters who display overconfidence are frequently humbled by the gods or fate. For example, in Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex", Oedipus's pride in his ability to solve the riddle of the Sphinx and avoid his fate ultimately leads to his downfall and humiliation. Many religious and moral traditions warn against pride. In Christianity, pride is considered one of the seven deadly sins because it leads individuals to place themselves above others and even above divine will. Proverbs 16:18 states, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." Similarly, in Buddhism, pride is seen as an obstacle to enlightenment and a source of suffering. From a psychological standpoint, excessive pride blinds individuals to their own limitations and vulnerabilities. This overconfidence leads to poor decision-making, as proud individuals ignore advice, underestimate risks, or fail to prepare adequately. When their plans fail, they tend to experience public humiliation or personal regret. In social contexts, people who are overly proud or arrogant often alienate others,

as their behavior provokes resentment or opposition, leading to situations where they are humiliated or brought down by others. A leader who is excessively proud will be challenged or overthrown by those who feel disrespected or marginalized. For example, in Shakespeare's "Macbeth", the hero's ambition and pride drive him to commit atrocities, ultimately resulting in his downfall and death. History is replete with examples of leaders and figures whose pride led to their humiliation. Napoleon Bonaparte's overconfidence in his military prowess led to his disastrous invasion of Russia and eventual defeat at Waterloo. Similarly, the hubris of many corporate leaders has led to the collapse of companies and their public disgrace.

Humility is unique among virtues in that learning or cultivating it often involves loss, surrender, or letting go, rather than acquiring something new. Unlike virtues like courage or knowledge, which are often associated with gaining strength or insight, humility rather implies relinquishing, be it self-image, pride, status, or even personal desires.

Humility requires shedding an inflated sense of self-importance or superiority. To become humble, we often need to acknowledge our limitations and accept that we are not always right, deserving of special treatment, or being particularly entitled. This means losing certain assumptions or attachments to our own status or self-image, somewhat deconstructing or distancing ourselves from our personal identity. .

Humility involves the willingness to step back, allowing others to lead, take credit, or have a say. This means giving up control, authority, or recognition, releasing control and power, which can feel like a loss but helps to foster a more constructive, cooperative approach to relationships, a conversion which is quite liberating.

Humility is nourished by events that remind us of our vulnerability or limitations, mistakes, failures, or moments when we don't meet our own expectations. These experiences, which can feel like losses, teach us humility by forcing us to confront our imperfections, accept them, and embrace growth from them.

Humility therefore implies releasing excessive attachment to success and material gain, it involves letting go of the need to accumulate wealth, power, or accolades as markers of worth. This "loss" can mean setting aside worldly ambitions in favor of focusing on relationships, ethical values, intellectual or spiritual goals, searching for more substantial anchors.

So, while most virtues involve acquiring new "strengths", humility stands out by requiring a process of surrender, of giving up certain aspects of ourselves that would otherwise unduly "inflate" our image, and hinder our maturation. This process of "loss" may be difficult, as it goes against our instincts to accumulate and assert ourselves, but it ultimately opens the way to a more rational and composed self-perception, to a greater capacity for authentic relationships with others, and to greater tranquillity of soul. Probably, in this diminution, humility is a real power.