

Against Tolerance: Cultivating Intellectual Humility in the Classroom

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We live in an age of overconfidence and pride. It takes little more than a few minutes' scroll through a social media newsfeed to draw the conclusion that our society is full of people who fail to pay serious attention to the statements of others and harbor little to no suspicion regarding their own claims to certainty. Such a disposition can all too easily manifest itself as hostility toward those whose knowledge claims differ from one's own. In response to this worry, a plausible path forward might seem to be to foster tolerance in the classroom.

A real, substantive engagement with the knowledge claims of others, though, must involve not only the recognition of the other's claim as making meaning for that person and a willingness to let that person believe as he chooses but also must result in the confrontation of one's own assumptions and beliefs about the nature of reality. Intellectual humility is one of the essential virtues for coming to recognize the knowledge of others and thereby developing one's own capacity to know. In this paper, I suggest that "tolerance" is an inferior substitute for intellectual humility, and, further, I argue that emphasizing an attitude of tolerance in the classroom actually has the potential to work *against* the cultivation of true intellectual humility.

To make this argument, I first turn to the features of intellectual humility itself, drawing out two key components of intellectual humility. Second, I discuss a seemingly common mode of discourse inside (and outside) of classrooms in which students express strongly held convictions in a manner that nevertheless avoids directly challenging the views of others. A prime example of this mode of discourse is the use of the phrase, "This is just my personal opinion, but..." I suggest that this kind of discourse might be symptomatic of a view that endorses the primacy of passion over reasoning and results in a sort of relativism;

if a student holds a belief strongly enough, no further justification is needed for that student to make a knowledge claim regarding the belief. I argue that the sort of conversation described above reflects an acceptance and internalization of the value of tolerance but fails to demonstrate true intellectual humility. Before closing, I offer a couple of arguments as to why educators should care about the cultivation of intellectual humility. Finally, I briefly suggest a few ways that educators, specifically, teachers in the classroom, might pursue the cultivation of intellectual humility with and for their students.

WHAT IS INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY?

Intellectual humility is an intellectual virtue concerned with the development of a right view of one's intellectual status and abilities.¹ Although intellectual humility has historically been of primary interest to philosophers who study epistemological theories focused on the intellectual virtues,² some psychologists have also begun to conduct empirical work on intellectual humility.³ As with most terms used in philosophical discourse, philosophers do not agree upon a single definition of what intellectual humility is. Further complicating the situation is the fact that intellectual humility has rarely been examined as a virtue in itself, rather being subsumed under broader investigations into humility or intellectual virtue more generally.⁴ At least three attempts at a definition, though, occur in the (expanding) literature on the topic that bear mentioning.⁵ First, a fairly intuitive definition of intellectual humility names intellectual humility as the virtue that allows a person to accept his intellectual limitations and acknowledge that he does not always get everything right.⁶ Note, though, that this definition becomes less satisfactory once a person considers the fact that someone could have a perfect estimation of his own intellectual abilities and accept his limitations and yet still have an attitude of arrogance towards himself and an attitude of disdain towards the intellectual status of others.⁷ This concern suggests another view of the constitution of intellectual humility: intellectual humility is the virtue that leads a person not to be concerned with his own intellectual status and how his status compares to that of others (for example, not getting puffed up when he realizes that his ideas are superior to

another's).⁸ Another approach draws explicitly upon the Aristotelian method of identifying a virtue as the mean between two vices. On this view, intellectual humility is the mean between the two vices of intellectual arrogance and intellectual diffidence.⁹

I suggest that the need to consider these varying definitions flows from the twofold nature of intellectual humility: true intellectual humility involves both a cognitive aspect and an affective aspect.¹⁰ In other words, intellectual humility requires both that a person recognize (in the sense of giving intellectual ascent to) the truth of certain claims regarding his intellectual status and also demands that he maintain a certain affective attitude towards his intellectual status, whatever that status might be. Imagine a person with extremely high and carefully developed intellectual abilities: this person might have a perfect estimation of his own abilities and know exactly when he should question his own beliefs (thus fulfilling the cognitive component of intellectual humility) but nonetheless relate to himself with pride and to others with arrogance and an attitude of dismissal. On the other hand, imagine a person who is, perhaps, in the middle of the road with respect to intellectual ability. Such person might have an attitude of respect and care when it comes to the views of others without it ever having occurred to him to examine his own intellectual limitations and to live with the appropriate degree of suspicion towards his own beliefs. Such a person meets the affective requirement for intellectual humility but fails the cognitive component. In this discussion, my intention is to demonstrate the plausibility of the view that there are two components to intellectual humility and that these components can come apart from each other, but that true intellectual humility occurs only when both the cognitive and affective elements are in place in a person's disposition.

CLASSROOM DISCOURSE: INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY OR TOLERANCE?

In this section, I return to the phenomenon that, as I gained more experience teaching undergraduates in college classrooms, I began to notice

permeating the discourse of the learning environment. Although I have not found any research that addresses directly the sort of discourse I describe here, my conversations with others who have taught at the postsecondary level (and some at the secondary level, as well) have revealed similar experiences and concerns on the part of these teachers, and I have come across a few blog posts addressing the phenomenon I describe here.¹¹ This evidence gives me reason to think that the mode of discourse in my classrooms was not unique but rather is perhaps a common feature of speech in undergraduate learning environments.

The phrase that best demonstrates the type of discourse with which I am concerned is an introductory phrase, a phrase that I suspect sounds extremely common to the ears of most people in our society: “This is just my personal opinion, but” Many variants exist, of course, and I heard them repeatedly in my classrooms: “Personally . . . ,” “This is just me, but . . . ,” “I just feel like . . . ,” etc. I found that, once I started listening for these expressions, I was somewhat taken aback by the number of contributions to discussion from my students that started with one of these phrases, or something similar. Although I had students in my classes who never used such phrases and instead presented the majority of their views as incontrovertible facts, many of my students began their statements with this sort of qualification. They seemed to have a desire to make it clear that whatever they were saying was simply their own opinion, but *because* it was their own opinion, they could not legitimately be challenged with respect to its truth.

Something about the approach of these students seems admirable. Rather than intellectually bulldozing over their peers, they seek to share their ideas in a way that does not threaten others or attempt to force certain viewpoints upon them. They do not lord their intellectual skills over others, and they are often very willing to listen to the views of their classmates. Their own opinions matter to them, but they have no sense that those opinions must make a claim on other people, since those other people also have their own opinions and are entitled to them as such. On the surface, it might seem that these students are exhibiting a posture of intellectual humility.

I suggest, though, that what is going on in this sort of discourse is *not*

usually a demonstration of intellectual humility. Rather, this kind of conversation reveals a certain kind of *tolerance* in students, a tolerance that I will argue is actually antithetical to true intellectual humility. I suggest that, although the sort of tolerance encouraged in many classrooms might foster the *affective* dimension of intellectual humility discussed above, it cannot adequately develop the *cognitive* aspect of true intellectual humility and can even work against the cultivation of this cognitive component.

I turn first to the claim that tolerance fails to meet the standard of intellectual humility and then take up a defense of my more controversial claim, that tolerance can actually work *against* intellectual humility. What is it that distinguishes tolerance, at least the sort often exhibited through the kind of discourse I describe above, from true intellectual humility? I suggest two related reasons that tolerance fails to meet the criteria of intellectual humility and why this might be problematic. First, tolerance is often based on the belief that “everyone is entitled to their opinion,” and that, if a person believes something strongly enough, it is problematic to call into question that person’s belief. This viewpoint demonstrates an approach that holds up the primacy of passion over reason with respect to beliefs. By “passion” here I mean something akin to strong emotion or commitment. Although on certain epistemological theories, passion could be a legitimate way to ground certain beliefs, it seems that many beliefs are not of this sort (for example, the belief that climate change is a hoax, or that the paranormal exists). There are certain conditions under which it is right to be confident in a belief one holds, and there are others in which it is not appropriate to maintain a high level of confidence. Many students today seem to hold certain beliefs quite passionately, and there appears to be a general sense among these students that, if they hold a belief passionately enough, the question of whether or not they have good reasons for such a belief – whether or not they are justified in their confidence – becomes a moot point. The passion of the individual supersedes the need for anything that connects the claim being made by that individual to the reality of the world. This view (what Ian Kidd calls a “cult of passion”)¹² renders toothless the possibility of real criticism from others, since, when a student introduces a claim with the

words, “in my personal opinion ...,” it seems that often she is pointing to the way in which the subsequent claim is held on the basis of passion rather than reason. Even if a person does have good reasons for a belief, these reasons are not necessarily considered to be the things that make it permissible for her to be firmly committed to the belief.

A second, and related, reason to question the sufficiency and even the value of the sort of tolerance I am discussing here is that such tolerance often masks a subtle but pervasive relativism. If it is passion rather than reasons that justify acceptance and even strong commitment to a belief, then it follows that one belief could be justified for one person and a fully contradictory belief justified for another with no consideration of the reasons for those beliefs. This means that knowledge is relative, and, since (plausibly) knowledge implies the truth of the proposition being known, it also means that truth is relative. Sincere, strong passion is enough not only to legitimize the belief but also is enough to make the belief a true one for the person holding it. For students who embrace the sort of relativism with which I am concerned, there is no good reason to question the legitimacy of their own views of the world, since, at least to some extent, they believe in their ability to determine their own truth.

These two features of the sort of tolerance with which I am concerned make it impossible that this tolerance should be compatible with or meet the standard of intellectual humility. Recall that the cognitive component of intellectual humility is based on the idea that a person must recognize his own intellectual limitations and accept the fact that he is capable, and perhaps even more likely than he might initially think, to get things wrong and to form *false* beliefs about the world. Without this cognitive component, intellectual humility cannot be true intellectual humility, regardless of what other components (social, emotional, affective, etc.) it might involve.¹³ For this cognitive component to make any sense, though, there must first be an acceptance of the idea that our claims about the world and reality *can* be objectively true or false. If I can “make” a belief true simply by believing it wholeheartedly, if passion is the criterion of justification, then I have no need to admit my intellectual limitations, because there is nothing to get wrong.

The picture I am painting here might seem a bit extreme, and I think that few people, even college freshman, would explicitly describe themselves as having the sort of epistemological views that I describe here. I also believe that many utterances of the sort I am discussing are symptomatic of somewhat different beliefs and motivations; sometimes the phrase, “This is just my opinion ...” might be little more than a protective mechanism for students who feel insecure about voicing strong claims. I do think, however, that this sort of relativism grounded in passion underlies a significant amount of the thought and discourse that occurs among people in our society, and that it is plausible to think that there is something here about which to be concerned.

My second claim is that tolerance not only is an inferior substitute for true intellectual humility but, further, that tolerance is actually antithetical to the development of true intellectual humility. This claim might seem implausible given the family resemblance between the two dispositions. Why not view tolerance as a stepping stone to the more mature cultivation of intellectual humility? I suggest that tolerance, as a disposition, works against the cultivation of intellectual humility because it often removes the motivation to pursue the development of intellectual humility.

Because of the way in which this kind of tolerance can lead to relativism as a result of its appeal to passion over reason, it is also capable of and perhaps likely to destroy the categories necessary for thinking about intellectual humility in a meaningful way, insofar as it removes the need for a concept of truth grounded in a notion of reflecting the reality of the world. Plausibly, many intellectual virtues are motivated by a love of certain epistemic goods, truth being a primary one.¹⁴ Love of the truth provides the motivation necessary to examine oneself honestly and make the sort of changes needed in order to form one’s mind in alignment with the intellectual virtues. But, if the truth is something that a person gets to determine for herself, then this love becomes inwardly rather than outwardly focused. It is no longer held to a standard outside the individual self; it leaves no room for correction or reorientation.

For students who embrace this sort of relativism, there is no good reason to question the legitimacy of their own views of the world, since, at

least to some extent, they believe in their ability to determine their own truth. Granted, many of them demonstrate respect for the views of others, a tolerance that is, on the surface, admirable. This respect, though, is not born out of a recognition of the possibility of intellectual failure on their part; rather, it is an attitude grounded in the belief that everyone's opinions are equally valid as long as the people in question hold those beliefs with a strong enough degree of commitment and passion.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY?

In this section, I consider some reasons for why educators should care about intellectual humility at all, although to do full justice to this topic would require a separate treatment. Why is tolerance not good enough? I suggest that there are two main reasons to prioritize the cultivation of intellectual humility in students: first, that intellectual humility contributes to the development of healthy and helpful public discourse, and second, that intellectual humility also contributes to the good of the individual.

Recent psychological research has indicated that people who can be reasonably described as “intellectually humble” are more likely to exhibit pro-social dispositions such as empathy, generosity, gratitude, and altruism.¹⁵ Most of us probably need little convincing that generosity, gratitude, and empathy are dispositions sorely needed in today's world. In addition, whereas tolerance encourages a “live and let live” attitude, intellectual humility can foster meaningful and open engagement. If a person sincerely accepts the possibility that he might be failing to arrive at the whole truth with respect to a certain area of knowledge, he will be more likely to engage in conversation with others.

Intellectual humility, though, is valuable for more than its utilitarian consequences for the public realm. If it is true that an important feature of the good life is that it is a life lived in accordance with reality, or the truth, then a person who makes no progress towards understanding this truth is barred from living a fully flourishing life. If the cultivation of intellectual humility is an important precondition for making one's way towards truth, or at least for

opening oneself up to truth, then intellectual humility is closely related to living a good life. And if, as I have argued, mere tolerance does *not* involve this sort of interest in the truth, then tolerance does not contribute to a flourishing life in this way. In fact, if tolerance as described here works against the desire to learn and know the truth, then tolerance might even bar people from flourishing as much as they could were their lives characterized by intellectual humility rather than by tolerance.

CULTIVATING INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

If it is true, as I have argued, that intellectual humility is different from and superior to mere tolerance, then the question of *how* teachers might go about educating for intellectual humility within the classroom become significant. In this last section of the paper, I offer a few preliminary thoughts in response to this need.

First, teachers can structure the expectations for classroom discourse such that students are challenged to articulate their views without implicitly weakening the potential significance of those views. An obvious way to do this is to strongly discourage the use of phrases such as “In my personal opinion ...” or “I just feel like ...” in the classroom. The very act of trying to articulate their ideas without recourse to these sorts of hedging phrases might heighten students’ awareness of their own commitments and assumptions.

Second, it could be helpful to introduce explicit discussion of intellectual humility into the classroom. What we might call “conceptual clarification” can be a useful way in which to move problematic and complex issues out into the open and raise awareness of assumptions that lie below the surface of discourse and thought.¹⁶ This is an area which the work of philosophers of education could be helpful. A first step by which to move towards intellectual humility and away from mere tolerance is to recognize that these dispositions are not the same. Teachers can then challenge themselves and students to act with intellectual humility. This can be done in a way that is not a lecture; teachers can have discussions about what kind of disposition people ought to have

towards their own intellects and those of others. Students, I think, are capable of making these distinctions, and they should clarify these concepts for themselves, guided by the teacher.

Explicit discussion about the difference between intellectual humility and tolerance, though, is not enough. This claim flows out of the oft-quoted maxim that, once a person realizes that he is being humble, he is no longer being humble. Humility cannot be focused on itself; it is necessarily directed towards something outside of itself.¹⁷ Excessive explicit focus on intellectual humility, then, will probably not be helpful to students. A third thing teachers might do to cultivate intellectual humility, then, is to focus attention on dispositions that are not identical to intellectual humility but are nonetheless helpful in fostering intellectual humility. Hope might be one such disposition,¹⁸ and the cultivation of wonder might also be conducive to the development of intellectual humility insofar as wonder helps people open themselves up to an encounter with the unexpected and unexplained.¹⁹

Finally, educators can introduce experiences into the classroom that heighten students' awareness of their own intellectual limitations. One way in which they might do this is through the method of Socratic questioning, leading students to a state of *aporia*. When a person arrives at a state of *aporia*, a state of great uncertainty and confusion, she is forced to admit that she does not know how to proceed and that some beliefs that she formerly considered unquestionable are now called into question. Although this experience is uncomfortable and can be disheartening if carried out poorly, an experience of *aporia* can help all those involved in education, not just students, take to heart the reality of their intellectual limitations and recognize that some truths cannot be justified by sincere belief alone.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that the sort of tolerance demonstrated by many students is an inferior substitute for true intellectual humility and can work against the cultivation of intellectual humility. Before closing, though, I

want to make it clear that my concern is not with all demonstrations of tolerance but with the particular sort discussed here, a version grounded in the primacy of passion over reason and one that gives birth to relativism. In fact, true intellectual humility might even lead to *more* tolerant attitudes and behaviors, since having the correct cognitive view and affective disposition toward one's own intellectual status and limitations might make a person more willing to give others the benefit of the doubt.²⁰ If this is the case, then seeking to cultivate intellectual humility rather than mere tolerance in students through the reclamation of classroom discourse, the development of dispositions such as wonder, and the experience of *aporia* can perhaps provide some hope for a more humble, generous, *and* tolerant society.

1 For a recent, thorough introduction to the landscape of research on intellectual humility, see Ian M. Church and Peter L. Samuelson, *Intellectual Humility: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Science* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 3-37.

2 A good introduction to virtue epistemology is Linda Zagzebski and Michael DePaul, eds., *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

3 For example, a recent study discusses empirical findings regarding psychological features that distinguish intellectual humility from humility more generally understood; see Don E. Davis, et al., "Distinguishing Intellectual Humility and General Humility," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 11, no. 3 (2015): 215-224. A related study examines the possibility of the development of a measurable scale of intellectual humility; see Elizabeth J. Krumrei-Mancuso and Steven V. Rouse, "The Development and Validation of the Comprehensive Intellectual Humility Scale," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 98, no. 2 (2016): 209-221.

4 Church and Samuelson, *Intellectual Humility*, 6-7.

5 Justin Barrett provides a helpful and concise summary of these three definitions; see Justin L. Barrett, "Intellectual Humility," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 1. (2017), 1-2.

6 Dennis Whitcomb, et al., "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94, no. 3 (2017): 509-539.

7 For further discussion of the possible deficiencies of a limitations-owning account, see Ian M. Church, "The Limitations of the Limitations-Owning Account of Intellectual Humility," *Philosophia* 45 (2017): 1077-1084.

8 Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, "Humility and Epistemic Goods," in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. M. DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003): 257-279.

9 Ian A. Church and Justin L. Barrett, "Intellectual Humility," in *Handbook of Humili-*

ty, ed. E. Worthington, D. Davis, and J. Hook (New York: Routledge, 2017), 62-75.

10 Alessandra Tanesini makes a similar distinction between two aspects of intellectual humility. See Alessandra Tanesini, "Intellectual Humility as Attitude," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96, no. 2 (2018): 399-420.

11 See Keith Lambert, "'It's Just My Opinion' and the Burden of Proof," *Education World*, <https://www.educationworld.com/teachers/its-just-my-opinion-and-burden-proof>; also, see Mike Gershon, "'It's Just My Opinion' Isn't Good Enough," *The Guardian*, January 2, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2012/jan/02/opinion-argument-free-speech>.

12 Ian Kidd articulates this point well: "A cult of passion encourages an attitude of unfortified passionate confidence that amplifies a student's agential confidence while also nullifying their possibility of robust critical appraisal by either their peers or their teachers ... If all that matters is the intensity of passion of one's sincere belief that *p*, rather than the issue of *p*'s truth, then the very idea of confidence conditions to be recognized and fulfilled—and thus of humility—is lost." See "Educating for Intellectual Humility," in *Intellectual Virtues and Education*, ed. Jason Baehr (New York: Routledge, 2016), 68.

13 Church and Samuelson make a similar point when they ground their entire book-length investigation into intellectual humility on a *doxastic* account of intellectual humility. Such a focus gives primacy to the importance of the truth status and justification for beliefs. See Church and Samuelson, *Intellectual Humility*, 7.

14 Jason Baehr makes this point in "Educating for Intellectual Virtues: From Theory to Practice," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47, no. 2 (2013): 248-262.

15 See Elizabeth Krumrei-Mancuso, "Intellectual Humility and Prosocial Values: Direct and Mediated Effects," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2017): 13-28.

16 Roberts and Wood use the phrase "conceptual clarification" to describe this phenomenon in Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 28.

17 As Roberts and Wood note, "the most perfect humility does not aim at humility; in exemplifying the virtue, the paragon of humility is always aimed at something other than humility." See Robert C. Roberts, "Learning Intellectual Humility," in *Intellectual Virtues and Education: Essays in Applied Virtue Epistemology*, ed. Jason Baehr (New York: Routledge, 2016), 189.

18 Aaron Cobb defines hope as "a virtue oriented toward the attainment of intellectual goods a person construes as possible but beyond his immediate ability to secure." See Aaron D. Cobb, "Hope for Intellectual Humility," *Episteme* (2017), 9.

19 For a helpful discussion of the role of wonder in moral education and formation see Anders Schinkel, "Wonder and Moral Education," *Educational Theory* 68, no. 1 (2018): 31-48.

20 See Tanesini, "Intellectual Humility as Attitude," 408.