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Intellectual Humility: What Does It Mean to Be Intellectually Humble?

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1. Introduction

There is widespread disagreement in the philosophical literature as to how intellectual humility ("IH" from now on) should be characterized. Some theories may to some extent overlap with one another, but there is no shared, basic notion of IH on the market.

We do however find a decent amount of agreement regarding *why* it is important to agree upon a basic conception of it; IH is an intellectual virtue and we need a common starting point in order to conduct empirical research on it, e.g. on how to measure it in people or how we should educate for it.

While empirical research on IH is more the domain of the psychologist, it is the task of the philosopher to find an apt characterization of it. So, how should we characterize the notion of intellectual humility, understood as an intellectual virtue?

To begin with, I'm going to proceed on the assumption that IH is the virtue of humility restricted to the intellectual domain; to be intellectually humble is to be humble in intellectual and/or epistemic matters. While I'm sure there are those who might disagree, I take this basic assumption to be rather uncontroversial.

Furthermore, I should also note that considering IH as an intellectual virtue will from the outset exclude portrayals of IH which doesn't describe a virtue. I take it as rather obvious that a characterization of a virtue must at the very least rule out non-virtuous manifestations of said character trait, or else we're not dealing with a virtue. In other words, a characterization of IH *as a virtue* should both rule out instances of too much intellectual humility as well as too little of it; someone being too intellectually humble would rather manifest what in the literature is referred to as intellectual servility, while someone not being intellectually humble enough would manifest intellectual arrogance.[1]

When looking for the most apt conceptualization of IH, I do think that pragmatic considerations are important. In other words, an account of IH shouldn't complicate matters beyond necessity (Ockham's Razor), since we want a characterization which realistically can serve as a starting point for empirical research. With that being said, whether or not a certain conception of IH is viable in practice, can only be answered conclusively after testing it. So for our present purposes, it is perhaps more important to look for an account which attempts to accommodate the pre-theoretical intuitions which arguably accompany the notion of IH (i.e. our intuitions about what it means to be humble with regards to intellectual matters). There are of course other reasons than empirical

[1] This is the standard (Aristotelian) view on virtues: as the means between two extremes. Thus, it's important to delimit the characterization of a virtue in order to preclude instances of it which obviously aren't virtuous. For contrast, imagine someone who is too courageous who might rather be said to manifest foolishness than the virtue of courage. Correspondingly, some type of "lower limit" is also necessary to distinguish between cowardice and courage.

applicability for adhering to the principle of Ockham's Razor; theoretical parsimoniousness is a desirable characteristic of theories in and of itself. In any case, the idea is to not make an account more complicated than *necessary*, and I do take consistency with our intuitions to be necessary for an account of IH.

What follows will be a comparison between two different contemporary accounts of IH – Whitcomb et al.'s *Limitations-Owning Account* and Church's *Doxastic Account* – where I will argue that while both accounts shed light on particular aspects of IH, neither gives us the full picture. There is however a straightforward way to revise the limitations-owning account, which turns it into an apt characterization of IH. Although my main focus will be on these two theories, I will during the course of this paper also mention and discuss a few others.

Before moving on to the main purpose of this paper I do feel the need to say something about intellectual virtues in general. How we choose to characterize what makes something an intellectual virtue will shed some light on some of the necessary conditions for a characterization of IH. This will be the topic of section 2. In section 3 and 4 I will review Whitcomb et al.'s account and Church's account, respectively. In section 5 I will argue from the intuition that IH is the virtue of honest self-evaluation in the intellectual domain; to be intellectually humble is to value yourself intellectually as you ought, and that the revised limitations-owning account captures this intuition. Finally, I will offer some concluding remarks.

2. What makes something an intellectual virtue?

To begin with, I am going to assume that intellectual virtues are traits of character. This is not an entirely uncontroversial assumption, but for our present purposes it does not make any difference whether we label intellectual virtues "character traits", "attitudes/cluster of attitudes", "behavioral dispositions" or what have you. I am not using "traits of character" in some strict theoretical sense; I am rather trying to capture what it signifies in an ordinary, intuitive understanding of the term. To put it simply, I will assume that character traits denote a type of regularity and stability in behavior; if person *S* has character trait *x*, then *S* will usually behave in the way that is typical of people with trait *x*. If *S* has the character trait of courage, then *S* will usually behave courageously.

So, what type of character traits are intellectual virtues? In general, an intellectual virtue can be described as a type of excellence of character which relates to the intellectual domain. But let us get a bit more specific.

For the purposes of this paper, I will employ the account of intellectual virtues presented by Jason Baehr in his 2011 book *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*, where he proposes the following: "A character trait T is an intellectual virtue just in case T contributes to its possessor's personal intellectual worth." (2011, p. 91). He goes on to explain

"personal intellectual worth" in terms of intellectual goodness/badness qua person and gives an account of what he calls the *basis of personal intellectual worth*:

> "A subject S is intellectually good or better qua person to the extent that S is positively oriented toward or "loves" what is intellectually good and is negatively oriented toward or "hates" what is intellectually bad." (2011, p. 101)

In other words, character trait T is an intellectual virtue if it makes its possessor intellectually better as a person, where an "intellectually good person" is to be understood as someone who is devoted to things such as truth and knowledge, while loathing things such as falsehood and ignorance.

Notice that Baehr's account does not have any kind of reliability condition, it does not require for intellectual virtues to consistently produce true beliefs. It is sufficient that the intention to acquire truth is there, since whether or not the beliefs in question actually end up being true seems to involve a certain element of cooperation from the external world. For a belief to be true requires a combination of internal as well as external factors, so there is a sense in which someone can be intellectually virtuous – i.e. meet all the internal conditions – while at the same time ending up with false beliefs, if for some reason or other the external world is deceptive.

Baehr (2011, p. 123 - 124) points this out himself and emphasizes that his internalist account of intellectual virtues is just highlighting one way in which one can be intellectually virtuous; there are certainly other dimensions to the notion of intellectual virtue, other ways in which someone can be intellectually virtuous. Being able to reliably or systematically generate true beliefs – let us call this "epistemic reliability" – might under a different conception qualify as an intellectual virtue, but this type of "virtue" does not bear on personal intellectual worth in the normative sense[2].

With that being said, intellectually virtuous people are still more likely than their non-intellectually virtuous counterparts to produce true beliefs. Since on Baehr's view, intellectual virtues contributing to their possessors personal intellectual worth is tantamount to them being "personal intellectual excellences" (2011, p. 96), and it is reasonable to assume that excellences of character – i.e. virtues – involves knowing when and how it is appropriate to make use of them. If you e.g. manifest courage at a time where it is not appropriate to act courageously or in a way which is inappropriate relative to what the situation calls for, that is not a manifestation of the virtue of courage. Thus, it is plausible to assume that even absent a reliability condition for intellectual virtues; they are in general – in the actual world and under normal circumstances – more likely than not to generate true beliefs.

[2] Following Baehr, "epistemic reliability" would probably rather be labeled a skill than a virtue. Since under Baehr's conception virtues have a normative dimension to them; they make you better as a person.

This point is something Alan Hazlett highlights in his account of virtues, where he first of all assumes that "virtues are, roughly, character traits that are either admirable or desirable" (2015, p. 74). And then goes on to define them more specifically as "excellences in Φing, i.e. dispositions to Φ at the right time and in the right way." (2015, p. 75). Where Φ should be understood as a variable for the activity that characterizes a given virtue. If we e.g. take the virtue of honesty, under this conception it would be understood as, roughly, an excellence in telling the truth, a disposition to tell the truth at the right time and in the right way.

Each of these aforementioned accounts highlights what I take to be the two most important aspects of what makes a given character trait a virtue. Furthermore, I think that it's clear that they are compatible with each other, since both Baehr and Hazlett view virtues as character traits that make you better as a person and think of them as excellences of character.

To sum up, I am going to assume that intellectual virtues are **(i)** character traits that contribute to their possessor's personal intellectual worth, and **(ii)** that they are character traits possessed to a degree of excellence.

With a clearer idea of what makes something an intellectual virtue, we can now turn to intellectual humility. How does IH contribute to one's personal intellectual worth? And what does it mean to possess IH to a degree of excellence? What activity (or activities) is IH a disposition to do at the right time and in the right way?

Next, I am going to take a look at the so called limitations-owning account of IH, as proposed by Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr and Howard-Snyder.

3. The limitations-owning account

Whitcomb et al. provide us with the following account of IH: "IH consists in proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one's intellectual limitations." (2017, p. 520). Furthermore, they state what conditions need to be met in order for IH to count as an intellectual virtue:

> "IH is an intellectual virtue just when one is appropriately attentive to, and owns, one's intellectual limitations *because* one is appropriately motivated to pursue epistemic goods, e.g. truth, knowledge, and understanding." (2017, p. 520).

A quick note on the word "owning", according to Whitcomb et al. "to own your limitations" is to "(1) believe that one has them; and to believe that their negative outcomes are due to them; (2) to admit or acknowledge them; (3) to care about them and take them seriously; and (4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them." (2017, p. 519)

In order to clarify the notion of "owning" even further, they take the example of (2017, p. 519) how a drug rehab program encourages its participants to "own" their addictions. Which shares a lot

of similarities with how having the virtue of IH, supposedly, prompts one to own one's intellectual limitations.

So, according to Whitcomb et al. IH is paying attention to and acknowledging your intellectual limitations in a proper way – i.e. only when the situation calls for it and neither under- or overdoing it – and it's only an intellectual virtue in cases where the underlying motivation is positively epistemic in nature.

On the face of it, I think that it's rather clear that this characterization of IH both describes a trait that contributes to personal intellectual worth as well as describes an excellence of character. I also believe that this account, at the very least, captures one dimension of IH. But does it capture it fully? Let us take a look at some of the arguments in favour of it.

3.1 In favour of the limitations-owning account

Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 521) give us two types of reasons to prefer their account over others. First of all, they offer us a range of intuition-based predictions about how IH is likely to manifest in people and claim that their account explains the plausibility of these predictions. Secondly, they contend that their account accommodates what is correct about other accounts of IH, while at the same time steering clear of the problems associated with them.

In total they list 16 such intuitive, pre-theoretical predictions and I will not list them all. But to provide somewhat of an idea of their line of argument, I will give a few examples. Some of these predictions are rather obvious – e.g. that being properly attentive to and owning your intellectual limitations is likely to manifest as a reduced likelihood to blame your intellectual limitations on others or try to explain them away when facing up to them (2017, p. 522). And some are not entirely relevant for the present discussion – e.g. that being properly attentive to and owning your intellectual limitations is likely to make you more open-minded towards other viewpoints than your own (2017, p. 524). While the connection between IH and intellectual open-mindedness may be interesting, and perhaps an account of IH should be able to explain their connection, they are conceptually distinct and I will have to limit the discussion to what is directly relevant. In what follows, I will focus on three examples that target behaviour that certain other accounts pick out as essential to IH, which makes them especially interesting:

> "2. IH reduces both a person's propensity to pretend to know something when he doesn't and his confidently answering a question whether or not he knows the answer." (2017, p. 522).

The thought is that being honest to yourself and others about your intellectual limitations is likely to make you less intellectually arrogant.

> "8. IH decreases a person's propensity to excessively compare herself to others intellectually." (2017, p. 523).

The idea here is that owning your limitations encompasses having an acceptance towards the fact that you have them – i.e. neither feeling hostility against them nor being in denial of them – which is likely to make you less intellectually vain in the sense that you will have a type of low concern for your intellectual status in comparison with others.

> "10. IH increases a person's propensity to revise a cherished belief or reduce confidence in it, when she learns of defeaters (i.e. reasons to think her belief is false or reasons to be suspicious of her grounds for it)." (2017, p. 524).

And finally, here we are shown the connection between limitations-owning and being non-dogmatic. Having an honest and accurate view on your intellectual limitations should make you more aware of the possibility of your beliefs being flawed. This accompanied with your love for epistemic goods (recall the underlying motivation that makes IH an intellectual virtue) is likely to result in you being more open to amend a belief in light of evidence against it, as opposed to dogmatically clinging to it.

Again, what makes these particularly interesting is that they are arguably describing manifestations of IH, while establishing a link between the dimension of IH that their account focuses on (limitations-owning) and other dimensions of it (IH as opposed to intellectual arrogance and intellectual vanity, and its' role in belief evaluation) that other accounts focus on.

I take the point as being to counter potential pushback their account might face for only shedding light on the aspect of IH which relates to intellectual limitations, these examples are supposed to show how being properly attentive to and owning your limitations is likely to lead to these manifestations of IH-typical behavior.

However, note that Whitcomb et al. don't want to include these types of behavior at the core of IH – as part of its definition. The argument is that their account explains why being intellectually humble is *likely* to lead to e.g. a low concern for intellectual status, but that it would be mistaken to include it as a necessary condition for IH.

Moving on to the second argument in favour of the account. Now the focus is on what's wrong with other accounts – why these aren't highlighting essential aspects of IH – rather than aiming to show how the limitations-owning account embraces what's correct about them.

Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 514) divide different types of IH characterizations in three categories, which they call **(i)** Proper Belief, **(ii)** Underestimation of Strength, and **(iii)** Low Concern. Good examples of the first category are Alan Hazlett's accounts of IH:

> "Intellectual humility is excellence in attributing ignorance to yourself, withholding attributing knowledge to yourself, and questioning whether you know" (2015, p. 76).

Above characterization is more or less a rephrasing of an earlier account by Hazlett:

> "Intellectual humility is the disposition to not adopt epistemically improper higher order epistemic attitudes, and to adopt (in the right way, in the right situations) epistemically proper higher-order epistemic attitudes." (2012, p. 220).

As we can see, Hazlett conceptualizes IH as a belief evaluating virtue, as a trait which disposes you to accurately regulate what you believe about what you believe. In other words, according to a Proper Belief account, if you believe that *p*, IH is the disposition to accurately assess the epistemic status of your belief that *p*; if your belief that *p* amounts to knowledge, justified belief or unjustified belief.

As we've already seen, Whitcomb et al. assert that owning your intellectual limitations is likely to result in a type of heightened awareness about the possibility of adopting flawed beliefs, which in turn should lead to greater caution before attributing knowledge to yourself. So, while they think that possessing IH is likely to result in such a behavioral disposition, they think it's wrong to characterize it in terms of it. Because according to Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 514) one could meet all the requirements of the Proper Belief conception of IH and still arguably display what intuitively would be described as a lack of IH. Their view is that on its own e.g. being excellent at attributing ignorance to oneself, is not sufficient for IH; you need to be excellent at it *due to* an awareness of your intellectual limitations. Furthermore, you can be completely aware of your ignorance about a given subject, but still act as if you are in the know; still defend your beliefs even though you know that they are unjustified (presumably because your motivations have to do with e.g. an increase in personal status rather than knowledge).[3]

Moving on to Underestimation of Strengths, these types of accounts characterize IH as "a disposition to underestimate one's intellectual strengths, accomplishments, social status and entitlements." (2017, p. 514). Thus, on this view IH is conceived of as a diminishing type of trait, where regardless of if a low estimate of your intellectual strengths would be accurate or not, being intellectually humble means to underestimate them. The problem with this proposal seems obvious;

[3] In defense of Hazlett's view it could be argued that this critique is unfair; that it's based on a rather brute, simplified interpretation of his account of IH. First of all, recall that according to Hazlett's characterization of a virtue, IH is an excellence in attributing ignorance to yourself etc. at the right time and *in the right way*. Attributing ignorance to yourself "in the right way" could just as well be argued to include doing it due to an awareness of your intellectual limitations. Moreover, the fact that you can still outwardly act in a way that is completely incompatible with IH, even though you meet the "internal" requirements for it, would be an equally valid counterargument against the limitations-owning account if it wasn't for the addition of the underlying epistemic motivation. It might be argued that "in the right way" also covers having the proper motivations, but even if it doesn't, Hazlett's account could be protected against this particular counterargument with the addition of the underlying epistemic motivation, just as the limitations-owning account is.

it makes no distinction between proper intellectual pride and intellectual arrogance (proper intellectual pride should roughly be understood as a justified and sober sense of pride about one's intellectual strengths). Thus, it allows for someone to underestimate the intellectual strengths *they actually have* to a degree that would amount to intellectual servility – i.e. it allows for someone to be *too* humble and is thus not describing an intellectual virtue.

Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 515) have similar issues with this account. They argue that it is possible to have an accurate estimation of your strengths – possessing a sense of proper pride – while at the same time being an intellectually humble person. Moreover, it also seems clear that it is possible to underestimate your strengths while at the same time failing to be intellectually humble; e.g. being clueless about your intellectual limitations or prone to react in an overly defensive manner if someone points them out.

And finally, as for the Low Concern accounts of IH – which conceptualize it as "a disposition to an unusually low concern for one's own intellectual status and entitlements" (2017, p. 514) – again, it seems possible to have no care at all for intellectual status but at the same time living in denial of your intellectual limitations. While Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 525) think that possessing IH is likely to lead to a low concern for one's intellectual status; they don't think it's necessary for the possession of IH.

This is where I and Whitcomb et al. diverge. In my mind a low concern for intellectual status is a very important aspect of the dispositional profile of IH, in virtue of the fact that in order for it to count as an intellectual virtue your motivations have to be epistemic rather than status-oriented.

Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 516) take the example of a woman in a male-dominated profession, who is rightly concerned with her intellectual status. I think that the mistake they are making is that just because it is an example of a justified concern with intellectual status, they don't want to deny the woman in the male-dominated profession the possibility of being intellectually humble. But they seem to neglect the fact that being motivated by an increase of intellectual status – no matter how justified it is – is directly at odds, it's in fact incompatible, with the motivation to pursue truth and knowledge (and recall that this motivation is included by Whitcomb et al. themselves as a necessary condition for IH). To be clear, I am not saying that a person demanding the intellectual equality she deserves excludes the possibility of her being intellectually humble. But I am claiming that an underlying motivation to pursue intellectual status is incompatible with IH, and according to Whitcomb et al.'s own definition of what makes IH an intellectual virtue, they seem to claim the same thing.

I realize that there is a possibility that we are not actually disagreeing about this point; that Whitcomb et al. might simply be saying that an interest in your intellectual status, as far as this interest amounts to a demand to be treated as an intellectual peer, is not incompatible with IH. This I

agree with. But a demand to be treated as an intellectual peer does not in general amount to a lack of low concern about intellectual status, so if this is all they are saying, there is no reason for them to exclude a low concern for intellectual status from the dispositional profile of IH. Insofar as a high concern for intellectual status generally amounts to intellectual vanity, and as far as being intellectually humble is incompatible with being intellectually vain, I hold that a low concern for intellectual status is an important aspect of IH.

So far I have gone over some arguments in favour of the limitations-owning account. While intuitively, I think it's clear that this account definitely sheds light on one particular aspect of IH, I have some issues with Whitcomb et al.'s criticism of alternative conceptions of IH. To recapitulate, their critique of Hazlett's account is partially based on an unfair reading of it, and as for the Low Concern accounts, their critique doesn't make any sense. Since Whitcomb et al. themselves include being motivated by a pursuit of knowledge and truth as a necessary condition for IH, which obviously is incompatible with status driven motivations in circumstances relevant to IH. Next, I am going to focus on some of the criticism against the limitations-owning account.

3.2 The problems with the limitations-owning account

I will focus on what seems to be the most serious flaw with Whitcomb et al.'s account of IH, a flaw which they themselves raise and go on to propose a solution for. Church (2017) also highlights this particular problem in his criticism of limitations-owning, and goes on to argue that Whitcomb et al.'s solution does not in fact solve anything.

The problem in question is due to the fact that the limitations-owning account only concerns intellectual *limitations* and makes no mention of intellectual *strengths*. As Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 528) themselves point out, this allows for someone to be intellectually humble while at the same time being overly attentive to and excessively own/overestimate their intellectual strengths – i.e. it allows for someone to be intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant at the same time. And this would of course not be an issue if, say, it merely allowed for someone to be intellectually humble about one thing, but intellectually arrogant about another. It would not be realistic to demand that people possessing the virtue of IH are intellectually humble about absolutely everything at all times; it should suffice that the intellectually humble person is *more often than not* displaying IH. In other words, if you happen to be intellectually arrogant about one thing, but are intellectually humble in regard to 100 other things, this should not deny you the possibility of possessing the virtue of IH. But the problem, which Church (2017, p. 1078) points out, is that Whitcomb et al.'s account allows for someone to be intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant about the *same thing at the same time*.

To illustrate, imagine that I am properly attentive to and properly own my intellectual limitations with regards to mathematics. I am aware of and do not try to hide the fact that I am by no means any expert on it. I never studied it beyond high school level, so I obviously can't consider myself on par with e.g. someone who has a PhD in theoretical physics. But at the same time, mathematics has always come easy to me and I always received excellent grades on the math courses I took in high school. So in my mind, I am naturally gifted when it comes to math, I could have easily become an expert on it if I wanted to. I just never chose to pursue it further after high school. So on the one hand, under Whitcomb et al.'s conception of IH, I am intellectually humble with regards to mathematics: I am perfectly aware of and acknowledge the limitations of my knowledge of it. But on the other hand, I am largely over-estimating my strengths with regards to it: mathematics might come easy to me, but considering myself as some sort of natural-born math genius arguably amounts to intellectual arrogance. Thus, the limitations-owning account allows me to be both intellectually humble and arrogant with regards to mathematics at the same time, since it does not rule out the possibility of over-owning my intellectual strengths; to possess the virtue of IH all I have to do is own and be attentive to my intellectual limitations.

Surely, this is a huge disadvantage of Whitcomb et al.'s characterization, an account of IH cannot allow for someone to possess the traits of intellectual humility and intellectual arrogance about the same thing at the same time.[4] Let us take a look at how Whitcomb et al. try to solve this problem.

There is one way to solve this problem which is perhaps the most obvious and straightforward: add something along the lines of "an *accurate* estimation of one's intellectual strengths" into the limitations-owning account. However, Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 529) are quick to dismiss this as a possible solution, due to the fact that they have a rather strict distinction between IH and proper intellectual pride: IH is properly attending to and owning of your intellectual limitations, while proper intellectual pride is properly attending to and owning of your intellectual strengths. On their view (2017, p. 531), humility strictly relates to limitations while proper pride strictly relates to strengths. Thus, there are two different ways in which someone can be intellectually servile as well as two different ways in which someone can be intellectually arrogant. According to them, you can be intellectually servile either by **(i)** paying too much attention to and/or excessively owning your intellectual limitations, or by **(ii)** paying too little attention to and/or not owning your intellectual strengths enough. And when it comes to intellectual arrogance, you can possess this trait either by **(i)** paying too much attention to and/or excessively owning your intellectual strengths, or by **(ii)** paying too little attention to and/or not owning your intellectual limitations enough. They explain that "proper pride lies in the mean between arrogance and servility, but only in so far as one's orientation

[4] Recall that a characterization of IH as a virtue needs to be able to rule out instances of too much as well as too little intellectual humility, otherwise we are not dealing with a virtue.

or stance towards one's strengths is concerned" (2017, p. 531), and thus the same goes for IH in regards to intellectual limitations.

Before moving on to Whitcomb et al.'s proposed solution, let us take a look at why they think it's necessary to completely exclude the mention of intellectual strengths from an account of IH. They are worried (2017, p. 529) that if a condition regarding one's intellectual strengths is included in an account of IH, it will render strange predictions. That it will lead to the counter-intuitive result that someone can fail to be intellectually humble by e.g. not acknowledging or being properly attentive to her intellectual strengths. That under this conception of IH, someone under-owning her intellectual strengths would be said to lack in humility.

I must admit that I, along with Church (2017, pp. 1082 – 1083), find this worry that they have rather odd. I think that it's perfectly reasonable to say that someone can fail to possess the virtue of IH by failing to own their intellectual strengths. Since it's a virtue we're dealing with, you can fail to be intellectually humble either by not being humble enough or by being *too* humble. It's unclear why Whitcomb et al. assume that an account of IH incorporating intellectual strengths would predict that someone under-owning them would be said to lack in humility, rather it would simply say that this amounts to someone being too humble.

Church (2017, p. 1080) also points out that this leads to another problem with their view: it does not just allow for someone to be intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant about the same thing at the same time, it also allows for someone to be intellectually humble and intellectually servile about the same thing at the same time. Just as an account of IH which makes no mention of intellectual strengths allows for someone to over-estimate their intellectual strengths while possessing IH, it also allows for someone to under-estimate them.

Not being able to rule out intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility are serious issues which arguably any account of a virtue needs to be able to avoid. The solution which Whitcomb et al. propose has to do with internal rationality. They claim that "IH *when combined with full internal rationality*, rules out IA [intellectual arrogance]. Fully internally rational people cannot be both intellectually humble and intellectually arrogant." (2017, p. 533). So, while they want intellectual strengths to be kept strictly conceptually distinct from intellectual limitations, they do hold that *rational* people with a sober view on their intellectual limitations are likely to also have a sober view on their intellectual strengths.

But what about people who are not fully internally rational, which as Church (2017, p. 1079) puts it, is literally almost everyone? Whitcomb et al. (2017, p. 533) recognize this, but maintain that as long as one is rational with regard to one's intellectual limitations and strengths, this won't be a problem. So they are willing to overlook this limitation with their solution, because they think that the alternative is more unsatisfactory. However, both I and Church believe that the alternative is a

far better solution: “To avoid the crippling limitations… and to save the view, Whitcomb et al. should think of intellectual humility as *the appropriate attention to and ownership of intellectual limitations and intellectual strengths*.” (2017, p. 1083).

In conclusion, I think that the limitations-owning account has definitely identified one aspect of IH; it is clear that being intellectually humble involves, *inter alia*, properly attending to and owning your intellectual limitations. But I think that it is equally clear that this is not the full picture. Moreover, this account faces some crippling issues which are left unsolved and Whitcomb et al.’s critique of alternative conceptions of IH remains unconvincing. In the next section I will take a look at a rather different conceptualization of IH, as proposed by Church.

4. The doxastic account of intellectual humility

Similar to Whitcomb et al.’s view of IH, Church (2016, p. 414) views it as the virtuous middle ground between intellectual arrogance and intellectual servility. What this actually amounts to is however where their opinions differ. While Whitcomb et al. construe it as an accurate evaluation of your intellectual limitations, Church on the other hand believes IH to consist of accurately evaluating your beliefs. Thus, Church’s account of IH shares some striking similarities with Hazlett’s account of it; it’s another an example of what Whitcomb et al. denote as a “Proper Belief” type of account:

> “DOXASTIC ACCOUNT”’: *Intellectual humility is the virtue of accurately tracking what one could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of one’s own beliefs*.” (2016, p. 427)

So, according to Church, to be intellectually humble is to have an accurate estimation of what you could blamelessly take to be the amount of justification your beliefs enjoy.[5] Consequently, being intellectually arrogant is taking your beliefs to be more justified than they actually are, while being intellectually servile is taking your beliefs to be less justified than they actually are.

The addition of “non-culpably” is important, it’s added in order to avoid making the account into one with a strict reliability condition. Since, as was pointed out in section 2, you can act perfectly virtuously, but under certain circumstances, still end up with false beliefs; if for some reason or other you have been misled. Thus, even if your estimation of the amount of justification your beliefs have is inaccurate, as long as it’s a result of you acting in good faith and it’s clear that you can’t be held accountable for said inaccuracy, you aren’t denied the possibility of being intellectually humble. An example might serve to further clarify this point.

[5] Church seems to use “positive epistemic status” and “justification” interchangeably. And just to be clear, to accurately estimate the amount of justification a given belief enjoys is tantamount to accurately estimating whether it amounts to knowledge, justified belief, unjustified belief or a mere hunch, and so on.

Suppose that someone asks me about what time it is, I throw a glance at my watch and confidently answer that it's 11:45. Unbeknownst to me, earlier this morning a friend of mine reset the time of my watch to play me a prank and it's actually 12:45. I have however no reason to believe that my watch isn't displaying the proper time. I had its batteries changed as early as yesterday, and it has always worked flawlessly. Thus, I'm perfectly justified in believing that the time is 11:45, and furthermore I'm perfectly justified in believing that my belief that the time is 11:45 amounts to knowledge. So, even though the positive epistemic status I attribute to my belief is inaccurate, since the belief is in fact false and doesn't amount to knowledge, I'm blameless in doing this.

At first glance, Church's account appears plausible, there is a definitely a sense of IH where it has to do with belief evaluation; being sensitive to when you can blamelessly take yourself to know something and when you can't. As for the conditions of what makes something an intellectual virtue, it also seems clear that a disposition to evaluate your beliefs in an accurate manner contributes to personal intellectual worth and also describes an excellence of character. Next, I'm going to go look at the advantages and disadvantages of Church's account.

4.1 The pros and cons of the doxastic account

Church begins with laying out his intuitive understanding of humility as a basis for his account of IH. The humble person, according to Church, is someone who "doesn't think too highly of themselves… nor do they think too little of themselves… the humble person would think of themselves – *value themselves* – as they ought." (2016, p. 414). He goes on to argue that if this is what, roughly, characterizes a humble person, then it seems plausible to assume that valuing your beliefs as you ought is what characterizes the intellectual humble person.[6]

Thus, one argument in favour of the doxastic account is this appeal to intuition, that his account does in fact pick out what it intuitively means to manifest IH: to neither think too much of your beliefs or overvalue them, nor to think too little of them or undervalue them, it's to attribute what you could blamelessly take to be the accurate value or justification to them.

While I agree that Church's account do score points on the intuitive side, simply appealing to intuition is however not a very strong argument. But Church does offer a stronger one: his account avoids what seems to be the most major problem plaguing other accounts of IH. He argues (2016, p. 428) that the doxastic account of IH does not allow for someone to possess IH while at the same time

[6] Under this conception, if valuing yourself as you ought is part of what it is to be humble in general, Whitcomb et al.'s account could be argued to describe a dimension of *humility* rather than *intellectual humility*; e.g. someone who doesn't acknowledge their intellectual limitations might as well be said to "think too highly of themselves" and thus simply be arrogant rather than intellectually arrogant. Church doesn't point this out himself, but I do take it as a consequence of his view; if IH exclusively has to do with belief evaluation, an accurate estimation of your limitations – intellectual or otherwise – is plausibly an aspect of humility rather than IH.

being intellectually arrogant, nor does it allow for someone to possess IH while simultaneously being intellectually servile. In other words, his account rules out manifestations of too much intellectual humility as well as too little of it. He doesn't however go in to much detail about how his account manages to do this. So let's see if this argument actually holds up to scrutiny.

Recall that based on how Church construes IH, to be intellectually arrogant is to attribute more justification to your beliefs than they deserve, and to be intellectually servile is to attribute less justification to your beliefs than they deserve. So, if being intellectually humble is to attribute just the right amount of justification to your beliefs – what you could non-culpably take to be the amount of justification that they deserve – it's rather clear that under this conception it's in fact impossible to be intellectually humble in regards to a given belief or set of beliefs while at the same time being intellectually arrogant or servile in regards to the belief/set of beliefs in question.

While this clearly is a major advantage with Church's account, it does however raise the question if this conception of IH manages to avoid this particular problem in virtue of it being rather narrow and perhaps too exclusionary. That while it might rule out instances of coinciding manifestations of intellectual humility and intellectual arrogance/servility, is the price we have to pay for adopting it the exclusion of other essential aspects of IH? The worry is that there is more to IH than belief evaluation. Moving on, I'm going to take a look at how Church handles objections to his account.

I will focus on two objections in particular, which Church attempts to answer: **(i)** that this account isn't describing the virtue of IH, it's describing something different, and **(ii)** that there is a social dimension to IH which the doxastic account neglects.

Church elaborates (2016, p.429) on the first objection by pointing out that some critique against his account has been that it's describing a feature of intellectual virtues in general, rather than picking out the specific virtue of IH. Another criticism has been that it does pick out a specific intellectual virtue, but that it's not IH, one suggestion being that his account is describing the virtue of intellectual accuracy.

Church goes on to dismiss both these points on the grounds that there is no common, shared notion of IH in the philosophical literature, there is no general agreement with regards to what IH amounts to. He does however emphasize that if it were to be generally agreed upon that his account is in fact describing a completely different virtue than IH, and agreement on what it's describing instead; he would have no problems with backing away from it. But since there is neither any consensus with regards to the conceptual basis of IH, nor in the criticism against his account, he sees no reason to abandon it.

It should also be noted that objection **(i)** fails in ways which Church doesn't mention. First of all, that "accurately tracking what one could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of one's own beliefs" would describe a feature of intellectual virtues in general is obviously not the

case, since there are examples of intellectual virtues which don't have to do with belief evaluation, at least not in this particular way. Intellectual open-mindedness, which rather has to do with an attitude towards the beliefs or viewpoints of other people, or intellectual perseverance, which doesn't really have to do with belief evaluation per se at all, rather a type of endurance when it comes to pursuing intellectual matters, just to give two examples.

Secondly, that the doxastic account is really describing the virtue of intellectual accuracy is clearly not the case either. Recall what was mentioned earlier in regards to the inclusion of "non-culpably" in the account; the estimation of the amount of justification that your beliefs enjoy doesn't actually have to be accurate, as long as you can't be held accountable (are non-culpable) for the inaccuracy.

Moving on to objection two. What exactly is this "social dimension" which Church's account supposedly leaves out? The idea is that while one aspect of IH clearly is intellectual or epistemic, there is another equally important aspect which is social in nature; it has to do with how you interact with other people. And the doxastic account is only concerned with one's own beliefs.

Church disagrees (2016, pp. 430 – 431) that any type of social element is necessarily part of IH. In any case, it's not clear why or how such dimension should be included. In his mind it's perfectly possible for someone to be intellectually humble while at the same time coming across, socially, as arrogant; e.g. someone who due to a lack of social skills is misperceived of as arrogant.

Furthermore, even if IH was to be shown to contain a social aspect, this would not indicate that there is anything wrong with the doxastic account; any potential social condition for IH can be developed in parallel with Church's account and be perfectly consistent with it.

It seems to me that a social dimension has a more evident connection to the moral virtue of humility, rather than the intellectual virtue of IH. If we recall that the underlying motivation behind the cultivation and possession of intellectual virtues is epistemic: you should be devoted to pursue things such as truth and knowledge and be deeply opposed to things such as ignorance and falsehoods. Thus, what makes someone "an intellectually good person", what contributes to one's personal intellectual worth, doesn't necessarily seem to be connected to anything distinctly social in nature. Now, it's certainly the case that the possession of certain intellectual virtues is likely to lead to the manifestation of certain behavior towards other people – I think it's plausible to assume that e.g. being intellectually humble usually goes hand in hand with being humble in general and is thus likely to lead to humble behavior in interactions with other people – but any distinctly social or moral condition seems to belong to the domain of (moral) virtues rather than their intellectual counterparts.

With this being said, I'm not at all opposed to the inclusion of a social dimension in an account of IH, *if* someone is able to specify exactly what this is supposed to be and successfully shows how it's an essential part of IH.

To conclude this section, I think that the aforementioned objections against the doxastic account do raise important questions, but in the end don't succeed in refuting it. I think that Church's account of IH highlights an important aspect of it, but with that being said, I don't think it paints the full picture. I will elaborate on this last point in the next section where I will try to see if it's possible to reach any conclusion in regards to what IH amounts to from the discussion of these two accounts.

5. The virtue of valuing yourself intellectually as you ought

After examining the limitations-owning account and the doxastic account, two things seem to be clear. Firstly, both accounts appear to shed light on *one* particular aspect of IH each. Secondly, neither seems to give us the full picture.

From the discussion it has become clear that Church's account faces fewer problems than Whitcomb et al.'s account, but as noted previously, it appears that the limitations-owning view could be salvaged with the inclusion of intellectual strengths. If Whitcomb et al. were to think of IH as involving the proper attention to and owning of one's intellectual limitations *and strengths*, their account would avoid allowing someone to be intellectually arrogant or servile while simultaneously being intellectually humble. The question then is: with this revision of their view, does it now give a complete account of IH?

Church's account, on the other hand, while seemingly not accompanied by any serious issues; I believe that there is more to IH than mere belief evaluation. In my mind, the doxastic account illuminates something which intuitively is an important aspect of IH, but nevertheless a very specific aspect. It appears to me that that the revised limitations-owning account provides us with a more general characterization of IH.

Let's take a step back and return to Church's intuitive understanding of humility, which was mentioned in section 4.1; humble people value themselves as they ought. I think this rough characterization of humility is correct. But rather than concluding, as Church, that therefore to be intellectually humble intuitively means to value your beliefs as you ought, I would argue that to be intellectually humble is to value yourself *intellectually* as you ought. Since, as was pointed out in the introduction, to be intellectually humble is to be humble *simpliciter* with regards to intellectual/epistemic matters.

So, what does it mean to value yourself intellectually as you ought? I think that this includes a number of distinct activities: to value your intellectual characteristics as you ought, to value your beliefs as you ought, to value your intellectual achievements as you ought, to value your intellectual

talents and skills as you ought, and so on. Does this mean that we need to include *all* of these activities in an account of IH? Probably not.

For the sake of space, I will concentrate on the two activities which has been the focus of this paper; the activity which the limitations-owning account focuses on (the evaluation of intellectual characteristics) and the activity which the doxastic account focuses on (the evaluation of beliefs).

So while I believe that it's clear that IH both consists of **(i)** the proper attention to and owning of your intellectual limitations and strengths, and **(ii)** the accurate tracking of what you could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of your beliefs, the question is if it's necessary to include both of these in an account of IH.

It's clear that one of these can't be *reduced* to the other; we're dealing with two different types of activities, two different types of evaluation. But what's interesting is rather if one of these can be accounted for, or explained in terms of, the other. In other words, if someone e.g. is intellectually humble under the revised limitations-owning conception of IH, does this entail that this person will also be intellectually humble under the doxastic account? To put it differently, if in practice the revised limitations-owning account rules out all of the instances of intellectual arrogance/servility as the doxastic account does, the need to specify that IH is a belief evaluating virtue becomes superfluous and would just complicate matters beyond necessity; since this is entailed by the revised limitations-owning account.

So what we need to establish is whether or not $Px \rightarrow Qx$[7]; that is, if Qx can't be false while Px is true. In other words, if someone *can't fail* to possess IH under the doxastic account if they possess it under the revised limitations-owning account, it's only necessary to include "the proper attention to and owning of your intellectual limitations and strengths" in an account of IH.

One way to test this is to see if it's possible to imagine someone, let's call this person Mr. S, who is intellectually humble under the limitations-owning conception of IH – Mr. S is properly attentive to and owns his intellectual limitations and strengths – but at the same time fails to be intellectually humble under the doxastic conception of IH – Mr. S is bad at accurately estimating what he could blamelessly take to be the amount of justification his beliefs enjoy. Imagine for example that Mr. S is a rather gullible man; he is one of those people who give a lot of epistemological weight to what "his gut tells him". Furthermore, he is perfectly aware of this, concerned about it and actively tries to remind himself that he shouldn't take everything that feels instinctively right at face value. Despite this, he's a big believer in astrology and thus regards his astrological beliefs to be justified, for no other reason than that astrology "feels right". And there is nothing strange about this, astrology might be such an important part of Mr. S's identity that in this case he is willing to make an

[7] Px: x is properly attending to and owning of their intellectual limitations and strengths.
Qx: x is accurately tracking what they can non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of their beliefs.

exception: he might know that gut instincts is not a good source of epistemic justification, but still be dogmatic about his astrological beliefs.

Is this an example of someone who succeeds in being intellectually humble under the limitations-owning account but fails in being it under the doxastic account (with regards to his astrological beliefs)? To me it appears as this is not the case. If Mr. S is *aware* of that the only source of justification for his astrological beliefs is a gut feeling, but he still views them as justified, I would argue that he in fact fails to be intellectually humble under the limitations-owning account; he does not properly attend to and own said limitation (his propensity to give a lot of epistemological weight to gut instincts) if he is aware of it and still actively ignores it. If one the other hand, he regards his astrological beliefs as justified but is *unaware* of that they aren't supported by anything else than his gut instincts (maybe someone presented him with falsified scientific data that "proved" astrology to be valid), this would make him non-culpable for said mistake and not exclude him from the possibility of being intellectually humble under neither the limitations-owning *nor* the doxastic account.

So even though we are dealing with two different ways to be intellectually humble, it appears as one can account for the other. If someone is intellectually humble with regards to their intellectual characteristics, it seems plausible to assume that one consequence is that the same person will also be intellectually humble with regards to their beliefs.

Another way to see this is to highlight the fact that Church's account - "to accurately track what you could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of your beliefs" - is obviously describing an intellectual strength. So, what Church is stating is that you need to possess this particular intellectual strength in order to possess IH. It seems to me that whichever way you look at it, if you "properly attend to and own your intellectual limitations and strengths" it does in fact guarantee that you will possess said intellectual strength. If you are extremely bad at accurately estimating what you could blamelessly take to be the amount of justification your beliefs enjoy, this is obviously an intellectual limitation, and thus if you properly attend to and own your intellectual limitations, you will realize that you have this limitation and be concerned about it. In other words, you will realize how bad you are at "accurately tracking what you could non-culpably take to be the positive epistemic status of your beliefs", and as a consequence view your beliefs as less justified if you realize that you tend to have too much confidence in them (or view them as more justified if you realize that your tendency is to have too little confidence in your beliefs).

With this being said, I'm not fully convinced that the doxastic account is in fact a consequence of the revised limitations-owning account, but I can't think of an instance where someone possesses IH under limitations-owning, but fails to do it under the doxastic account. If I'm wrong about this, I do believe it's necessary to phrase a characterization of IH which explicitly mentions both intellectual

characteristics and beliefs, since it's clear that belief evaluation is an essential aspect of IH; it's rather obvious that evaluating your beliefs falls under the rubric of intellectual self-evaluation.

In any case, if possessing IH with regards to your intellectual characteristics entails possessing it with regards to your beliefs – which it seems to do – it does become superfluous to phrase an account which mentions all the specific ways which one can be intellectually humble.

It's also clear that it's not the other way around, that it's not the case that the doxastic account entails the revised limitations-owning account. It's not hard to imagine someone who is intellectually humble under the doxastic account, but who fails to attend to and own his intellectual limitations or strengths.

Let's take Mr. S again, who now is excellent at accurately estimating what he could blamelessly take to be the amount of justification his beliefs enjoy; he's really good at determining when he can take himself to know something and when he can't. Nevertheless, he is a man who arguably would be described as intellectually arrogant; he largely over-estimates his intellectual strengths and under-estimates his intellectual limitations. Mr. S is well aware of how good he is at determining when he can take himself to know something and when he can't, and he takes great pride in this. In his mind, when it comes to knowledge judgments (i.e. judging when a given belief amounts to knowledge), he sees himself as some type of world leading authority and thus always values his personal judgments higher than everyone else's. No matter how good you are at making knowledge judgments this arguably amounts to over-estimating an intellectual strength, i.e. it amounts to intellectual arrogance. Furthermore, he also considers himself as someone with outstanding mental stamina, someone who is tireless in his pursuit of intellectual goals. However, the truth is quite the opposite; he is someone who most people would describe as possessing the vice of intellectual laziness rather than the virtue of intellectual perseverance. Thus, he's also intellectually arrogant in the sense that he under-estimates his intellectual limitations. So, it's clear that possessing IH under the doxastic-account does in no way guarantee possessing it under the revised limitations-owning conception.

Therefore, the revised limitations-owning account seems to provide us with an apt general characterization of IH, while the doxastic account highlights an essential, specific aspect of IH; an aspect of IH which the revised limitations-owning account entails.[8]

To sum up, this leaves us with the following definition of IH:

[8] I realize that I at this point have left some loose ends. As I mentioned in the beginning of this section, "to value yourself intellectually as you ought" plausibly involves more than evaluating your intellectual characteristics and beliefs; evaluating your intellectual achievements and evaluating your intellectual talents and skills, were two examples. Whether or not the revised limitations-owning account also entails these further activities, is not something that I will be able to explore in any further detail. With that being said, I think it's plausible to assume that it does; someone who values their intellectual characteristics as they ought is likely going to value their intellectual achievements, talents and skills as they ought. I have a hard time imagining someone who e.g. over-estimates their intellectual achievements while properly attending to and owning their intellectual limitations and strengths. Due to lack of space, I will have to leave it at that.

> To be intellectually humble is to properly attend to and own your intellectual limitations and strengths, *because* you have the underlying motivation of pursuing epistemic goods.[9]

Putting it broadly, IH is the virtue of honest self-evaluation in the intellectual domain; it is the virtue of valuing yourself intellectually as you ought. The revised version of the limitations-owning account seems to provide us with the best general description of what this actually amounts to, while at the same time not excluding other more specific aspects of IH.

6. Conclusion

Both the revised limitations-owning account and the doxastic account seem to be valid characterizations of IH. However, Church's account highlights a very specific aspect of what it means to be intellectually humble, while the revised version of Whitcomb et al.'s account gives us a more general characterization of IH. While it's clear that each account describes different ways to be intellectually humble; on the one hand, we have an account of what it means to be humble with regards to your intellectual characteristics, on the other hand we have an account of what it means to be humble with regards to your beliefs. It's plausible to assume that if someone evaluates their intellectual characteristics as they ought, this should entail that they will also evaluate their beliefs as they ought.

IH is undoubtedly a complex and many-sided virtue; a large number of distinct activities can be said to characterize this virtue. I have however argued that it's unnecessary to include them all in a characterization of it. What we want to find is the most central aspect of what it means to be intellectually humble, and in my mind, this aspect is highlighted by the revised limitations-owning account. The proper evaluation of your intellectual characteristics – "the proper attention to and owning of your intellectual limitations and strengths" – is what I believe to be the most important and fundamental aspect of intellectual humility.

[9] Recall that the addition of the underlying epistemic motivation is what makes it an intellectual virtue to begin with: the devotion to the pursuit of knowledge and truth (and the aversion towards ignorance and falsehoods) is added in order to exclude being motivated by things such as e.g. status, money or power.

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