

# Limitations-Owning and the Interpersonal Dimensions of Intellectual Humility

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**Abstract.** According to one prominent account of intellectual humility, it consists of a disposition to “own” one’s intellectual limitations. Because it describes intellectual humility as *inward-facing* or *interpersonal*, this account been criticized for neglecting the *interpersonal* dimensions of IH. We expect intellectually humble persons to be, for instance, respectful and generous with their interlocutors and to avoid being haughty or domineering. I defend the limitations-owning account against this objection in two ways. First, I argue that some of the interpersonal qualities associated with intellectual humility are qualities expressive of virtues *other* than intellectual humility. Second, I argue that, when properly described, the kind of limitations-owning characteristic of intellectual humility in fact is robustly interpersonal. The result is a considerably broader and richer characterization of intellectual humility understood as a disposition to own one’s intellectual limitations.

**Keywords:** intellectual humility, intellectual limitations, limitations-owning, interpersonal dimensions of intellectual humility.

According to one prominent philosophical definition of intellectual humility (IH), it is a disposition to be appropriately attentive to and “own” one’s

intellectual limitations (Whitcomb *et al* 2017).<sup>1</sup> By way of illustration, consider the following passage from *The Search* by C. P. Snow, in which Arthur Miles, a scientist on the cusp of a major breakthrough in X-ray crystallography, suddenly encounters some decisive counterevidence:

There were four photographs left to inspect [...] I ran over the first, it was everything I expected. The structure was fitting even better than in the early experiments. And the second: I lit a cigarette. Then the third: I gazed over the black dots. All was well – and then, with a thud of the heart that shook me, I saw behind each distinct black dot another fainter speck. The bottom had fallen out of everything: I was wrong, utterly wrong. I hunted round for another explanation: the film might be a false one, it might be a fluke experiment; but the look of it mocked me [...] Could it be explained any other way? I stared down at the figures, the sheets of results which I had forced into my scheme. My cheeks flushing dry, I tried to work this new photograph into my idea. An improbable assumption, another improbable assumption, a possibility of experimental error – I went on, fantastically, any sort of criticism forgotten. Still it would not fit. I was wrong, irrevocably wrong. I should have to begin again. (Snow 1958: 92)

Initially, Miles resists the counterevidence to his hypothesis, rooting around for an alternative explanation. He quickly realizes, however, that no such explanation is forthcoming, and that his hypothesis has been decisively refuted. In acknowledging this defeat, Miles instantiates IH.

While plausible in many respects, the limitations-owning (LO) account of IH has been criticized for neglecting certain *interpersonal* characteristics that supposedly are part of the conceptual core of IH (e.g. Priest 2017). According to the criticism, IH is not merely or even primarily a matter of how one is oriented toward *oneself*, or to one's *own* intellectual limitations; rather, it is also or primarily a matter of how one is disposed toward *others* in an epistemic context, for instance, whether one listens well, gives others the credit they deserve, avoids grandstanding,

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<sup>1</sup> Work on this paper was supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation (“Development of Intellectual Humility: Pilot Grants” ID 62242). I’m very grateful to members of the Intellectual Humility Virtual Network and two anonymous referees for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of the paper.

manipulation, and so on. The LO account, however, fails to capture these aspects of IH. By conceptualizing IH as inward-facing or *intrapersonal*, it neglects its social or interpersonal features.

In what follows, I defend the LO account against this objection. I argue that the kinds of interpersonal actions and attitudes just noted should not, as such, be viewed as part of the conceptual core of IH, but also that, when properly described, intellectual limitations-owning itself has robustly interpersonal dimensions. I conclude that while IH is fundamentally or conceptually a matter of owning one's intellectual limitations, we are right to associate it with certain interpersonal actions and attitudes. In addition to clarifying the nature of IH, the discussion also sheds light on the application of IH to cooperative epistemic contexts, such as a scientific research team, an interactive classroom environment, or a political group or movement.

## 1. Against the LO Account

We can begin by examining what has been said in support of the claim that IH should be defined at least partly in interpersonal terms. I will focus, in particular, on what I consider to be the two most compelling lines of argument for this claim.

The first begins with the idea that certain *negative* interpersonal attitudes and behaviors are *inconsistent* with IH and concludes that IH must consist at least partly in *not* instantiating these attitudes or behaviors. The work of Bob Roberts and various co-authors is especially relevant here (see e.g. Roberts and Wood 2007; Roberts and West 2017). According to Roberts and Jay Wood, IH is an *absence* of various “vices of intellectual pride,” including haughtiness, self-righteousness, domination, selfish ambition, and self-complacency (2003: 257–258). These vices have significant interpersonal dimensions: they show themselves in how we think, feel, and act toward others. Similarly, Maura Priest observes that we expect intellectually humble persons not to be status-obsessed, showy about their accomplishments, entitled, disrespectful of others' intellects, intellectually dismissive, deceptive, manipulative, or controlling (2017: 467–474). She

observes that there is something “painfully unfitting” about the assertion that “Toby is such a sweet, humble guy. But what an asshole!” (469). This leads Priest and others to conclude that IH is, at a minimum, *negatively* interpersonal, in the sense that it necessarily involves *not* thinking about or behaving toward others in the indicated ways.

These authors are right that we expect intellectually humble persons not to think, feel, or act in the manner described. But how is this supposed to be an argument against the claim that IH can be defined intrapersonally? The answer, I take it, is that if IH *were* strictly intrapersonal, if it were strictly a matter of attending to and owning one’s intellectual limitations and flaws, this would allow for the possibility that intellectually humble persons might instantiate the relevant interpersonal attitudes and actions. However, the argument continues, these attitudes and actions are *inconsistent* with IH. Therefore, IH cannot be strictly intrapersonal. It must also have an interpersonal dimension.

A similar but more direct line of argument appeals to certain *positive* interpersonal attitudes and behaviors that intuitively are *expressive* of IH. In this connection, Priest argues that IH is interpersonal in the sense that it “can only be adequately described with reference to agents other than the virtue holder” (2017: 468). To support this claim, she notes that we expect intellectually humble persons to have “a special concern for others,” listening attentively to what they have to say, responding generously to their input on our ideas, and respecting their intellectual autonomy (472–474). In a similar vein, according to a recent comprehensive survey of research on IH, the majority of existing psychological definitions and measures of IH identify internal qualities of the sort just noted as core features of IH (Porter *et al* 2021, 7). It is not implausible to think that we often expect intellectually humble persons to engage with their interlocutors in ways that are attentive, generous, respectful, and the like. This suggests, contra the LO account, that IH is partly *constituted* by a disposition to listen attentively to others, respect their intellectual autonomy, and the like (i.e. that, conceptually speaking, it is not merely a matter of intellectual limitations-owning).

## 2. Limiting the Scope of IH

Further below, I'll get to what I think is right about the arguments just noted. First, however, I want to explain why their force against the LO account is consider more tenuous and qualified than initial appearances might suggest.

### 2.1. Conflation with other virtues

The arguments against the LO account specify features that purportedly are inconsistent with or expressive of IH. This, then, is taken to show that IH consists of an absence or presence of these features, respectively. However, both arguments appear to conflate IH with *other* virtues, at least to some extent.

To illustrate, some of the negative behaviors described in the first argument indicate an absence of virtues like kindness, respect, and generosity instead of or at least more centrally than they indicate an absence of IH. Priest, for example, comments that “if the intellectually humble person is anything at all, *he is not an asshole*” (2017: 469; emphasis in original). While Priest is right that intellectually humble persons generally are not assholes, the attitudes and actions in question more conspicuously signal an absence of virtues like *respect, fairness, thoughtfulness, and consideration*.

A similar point applies in connection with the *positive* interpersonal behavior that Priest identifies as the conceptual core of IH. On her view, IH is fundamentally a form of *respect for others' intellectual autonomy* (473–475). While I agree that intellectually humble persons tend to be intellectually respectful, intellectual respect is *a virtue in its own right*, distinct from IH. Accordingly, Priest's view runs afoul of the plausible idea that, other things being equal, if a certain kind of characterological excellence falls within the conceptual purview or scope of one virtue, we should resist building that excellence into our conceptualization of different virtue. Put another way, different virtues cover different psychological or characterological territories. Therefore, barring some rationale

for doing otherwise, we should resist ascribing a single characterological strength (e.g. respect for others' intellectual autonomy) to the conceptual core of more than one virtue (e.g. to intellectual respect *and* IH). (Interestingly, Priest shows some sensitivity to this principle as it relates to the conflation of IH and open-mindedness; however, she doesn't consider the possibility that her own view might conflate IH and intellectual respect. See p. 475, n. 8.)

## 2.2. The correlation of IH with other virtues

If we resist defining IH in terms of the absence or presence of interpersonal attitudes and behaviors characteristic of other virtues, how are we to explain the intuitive association (whether negative or positive) between IH and the various attributes and behaviors in question? That is, if IH shouldn't be defined (at least partly) in terms of an *absence* of intellectual vanity, self-righteousness, or selfish ambition, or in terms of the *presence* of intellectual respectfulness, thoughtfulness, or generosity, why is it intuitively plausible to think of the former as indicating a failure of IH and the latter as indicating its possession? A defender of the LO account has a ready reply to this question, which is that if this account is correct, we should expect a *tight (negative or positive) correlation* between IH and the attitudes and behaviors at issue.

I begin with the negative correlation. Why do some of us find ourselves preoccupied with matters of intellectual prestige or with trying to prove that we're smarter or more correct than our peers? In many cases, a plausible explanation is that we feel insecure about or uncomfortable with—that we have not yet accepted or “owned”—our intellectual limitations, deficits, or mistakes. To compensate, we compare ourselves with our peers, concern ourselves with status and influence, have a difficult time admitting when we are mistaken, and so on. Accordingly, if the LO account of IH is correct, we'd be reasonable to expect persons who possess IH to be less susceptible to these concerns, that is, to be less likely to instantiate the “vices of intellectual pride.”

A similar explanation holds for the intuitive connection between IH and the various *positive* characteristics noted by Priest and others. Again,

we can begin by considering what tends to explain the *absence* of these characteristics. Why are we often tempted to be disrespectful, unkind, or ungenerous with our interlocutors? To be sure, our reasons are several and complex. However, for many of us, they include the fact that we want to be right or have a difficult time admitting when we are wrong or when our beliefs are not as well-supported as we initially thought. In other words, we have a difficult time admitting our intellectual limitations and mistakes. Therefore, we might expect persons who are intellectually humble—who are appropriately attentive to and *comfortable* with their intellectual limitations—to be more likely to treat their interlocutors with greater respect, kindness, and generosity.

### 2.3. The (possible) “unity” of IH with other virtues

We’ve seen that the LO account can go at least some way toward explaining the intuitive connection between IH and the absence or presence of certain interpersonal behaviors. But does it go far enough? In response, it might be reasserted that IH doesn’t merely make the relevant interpersonal behaviors *probable* or *improbable*, but in fact is *inconsistent* with the absence of the positive behaviors and the presence of the negative ones. In other words, if one is IH, then *necessarily*, one will be intellectually respectful, thoughtful, and generous, and won’t be intellectually dismissive, vain, selfishly ambitious, or the like.

I think the plausibility of this assertion depends on which specific attribute we are considering. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let’s imagine that these necessary connections obtain. I turn now to explain how the LO account can make sense of them.

First, IH understood in terms of LO might be a psychological *precondition* for the presence or absence of these other qualities. For instance, it may be that many of us will be *unable* to resist the allure of intellectual vanity or selfish ambition if we are not sufficiently comfortable with and accepting of our intellectual limitations and weaknesses. Similarly, showing proper intellectual respect or generosity toward an interlocutor can be difficult, especially if this person has adopted a contrary stance toward us. In cases like this, it can be tempting to respond in kind, exagger-

ating the intellectual faults and limitations of the other and losing sight of our own. Thus, many if not most of us may be incapable of showing respect and generosity to our more disagreeable interlocutors unless we already possess a reasonably firm disposition to attend to and own our own intellectual limitations and mistakes.

We might even go a step further and stipulate that *no one* can instantiate or refrain from instantiating the positive or negative attributes in question on *any* occasion or to *any* degree unless they first are capable of appropriately attending to and owning their intellectual limitations. In fact, this is also consistent with the LO account of IH. That is, it is consistent with the idea that IH is essentially a matter of LO, but that a disposition to engage in LO is a necessary precondition for the possession of certain other virtues and the avoidance of certain vices. Alternatively, it is possible that IH is “unified” with other virtues, such that to possess these virtues, one must also possess IH, and with the absence of certain vices, such that to avoid possessing these vices, one must possess IH. Again, none of this requires abandoning the idea that IH is essentially and fundamentally *intrapersonal*.

### 3. The Interpersonal Dimensions of LO

We’ve found that some of the interpersonal qualities the presence or absence of which have occasionally been identified as defining features IH may be better understood as defining features of virtues other than IH. We’ve also found that the LO account of IH can explain why we nevertheless tend to associate these qualities or their absence with IH. I turn now to argue that while we should refrain from *defining* IH in terms of the presence or absence of the interpersonal qualities discussed above, the activity of owning our intellectual limitations can be robustly interpersonal.

If the LO account is correct, in what ways might IH have an interpersonal dimension? One response is that IH often has important *benefits for others*. For instance, in a competitive learning environment, a teacher’s willingness to admit what he doesn’t know might inspire his struggling students to feel more comfortable doing the same, which in turn



might encourage them to get the assistance they need. Similarly, a political leader's IH might prevent her from making careless or unfounded judgments, which might significantly benefit her constituents. IH is also interpersonal in the sense that we often need others to help us acquire an *awareness* of our intellectual limitations. First-person access to these limitations is limited. We often need input from others to develop an accurate or comprehensive sense of where our perspective or methods are incomplete or vulnerable to error. Finally, some of our intellectual limitations are intrinsically *relational*, such that owning them has an interpersonal dimension. None of us is fully intellectually autonomous; we are all of us indebted to our parents, teachers, and other members of epistemic community for a great deal of what we know and learn. Similarly, many of our intellectual limitations are relative to the intellectual abilities and limitations of others. Compared with the knowledge of an average middle schooler, my grasp of a given topic may be impressive, while compared with the grasp of an expert, it might be poor. Thus, owning limitations like these often involves activities that are interpersonal, such as asking for help or deferring to others.

There are, in fact, even deeper and more interesting ways in which appropriately attending to and owning our intellectual limitations can be interpersonal. These ways can be brought to light by way of a trio of distinctions, to which I now turn.

### 3.1. Intrinsic vs. extrinsic limitations

The first is a distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* intellectual limitations. Many of our intellectual limitations are *intrinsic* in the sense that they are features of our cognitive character or noetic structure considered in their own right. These include limitations of our intellectual character (e.g. intellectual laziness), our individual cognitive capacities (e.g. lack of aptitude for quantitative reasoning), our general cognitive capacity as humans (e.g. our inability to know the future), or our evidence base for particular beliefs (e.g. lack of conclusive evidence).

Other intellectual limitations, however, are *extrinsic*, that is, they are at least partly a function of factors outside of a person's cognitive char-

acter, abilities, or noetic structure. These include some of the relational limitations noted above, such as a person's dependence on members of their epistemic community for the development of their cognitive abilities or their ignorance relative to another person's expertise. They can also include other features of a person's epistemic environment. For example, if the Wi-Fi and cell service in my area goes out, I'll immediately be limited in the kinds of and quantity of information I can access. Plausibly, if I undertake desperate or foolish measures to try to restore the connection, my efforts might betray a lack of IH. By contrast, if I accept that for now this is my epistemic lot and proceed to adjust my epistemic expectations accordingly, I might manifest IH.

### 3.2. Non-normative vs. normative limitations

A second and cross-cutting distinction is between *non-normative* and *normative* intellectual limitations. The example of losing Wi-Fi service involves a *non-normative* intellectual limitation in the sense that the cause or source of the limitation is a descriptive or non-normative fact about my epistemic environment. Other intellectual limitations, however, have a *normative* character. I'll begin by noting an extrinsic normative limitation. Suppose your evidence supports a conditional statement of the form  $P \rightarrow Q$ , that you want to believe  $Q$ , but that your evidence does not support  $P$  (again, it only supports the conditional statement that *if*  $P$ , then  $Q$ ). There is a clear sense in which you are *prevented* from believing  $Q$ . Certain logical and evidential facts *restrict* what you can reasonably conclude. This limitation has a normative character: it is a limitation or restriction on what you can *justifiably* believe given the combination of your evidence and certain logical principles. Moreover, it is plausible to think that how you respond to this limitation might reveal whether or the extent to which you possess IH. For, it might take IH for you to accept that you cannot reasonably conclude  $Q$  despite the fact that you would very much like to. Or, if you do proceed to assert  $Q$ , you might thereby manifest a *lack* of IH; your assertion might reveal a kind of intellectual *arrogance* on your part.

### 3.3. Impersonal vs. personal limitations

I turn now to a third distinction that also cuts across the preceding ones. In the scenario in which my internet and cell service go out, the resulting intellectual limitation is *impersonal*. It is a feature of my cognitive environment, not of any feature or characteristic I possess *qua* person. Similarly, we can think of your inability to justifiably infer Q from P as a function of certain impersonal evidential facts and norms. However, intellectual limitations can also be *personal*. Consider, for instance, Arthur Miles's decision to refrain from suppressing the counterevidence to his theory. Why does he refrain? In the story, Miles explains this decision partly in terms of the demands of his "conscience" (Snow 1958: 92). His conscience dictates that he not ignore or suppress the counterevidence. It limits what he can justifiably think or do. This limitation is notably personal.

To further illustrate the notion of a personal intellectual limitation, it will be helpful to think for a moment about epistemic *rights* and *obligations*. As many philosophers have noted, persons have distinctively epistemic rights—rights that pertain to our epistemic activities and aims (Fricker 2007). We have the right to have our voices be heard, to have our testimonial assertions taken seriously, to be informed of certain political happenings, and so on. These rights generate epistemic obligations on others. Others are obligated to listen to us, give due consideration to our testimonial assertions, and meet certain standards of transparency. In turn, these obligations, and the rights from which they derive, place considerable normative *constraints* on our intellectual conduct—on what we can and cannot justifiably do, think, or say.

Consider, for instance, a researcher who, owing to a momentary lapse of intellectual carefulness, has accidentally plagiarized the work of a colleague in her field. Once this mistake is brought to her attention, the researcher is obligated to her colleague to cease representing the colleague's work as her own. If she accepts this fact and behaves accordingly, her conduct may instantiate IH. Similarly, suppose you are teaching a course in your area of expertise. A student comes to your office wanting to challenge some of the arguments you've put forth in support of a particular

view. As the student struggles to articulate his thoughts, you might be inclined to dismiss what he is saying—to not listen very carefully, to immediately correct the smallest of infelicities, or to become impatient and condescending. It isn't difficult to imagine that, despite how the student is struggling, his thoughts and best efforts might merit your thoughtful and patient attention. On one way of describing the situation, the student has certain epistemic rights that constrain what you can justifiably think or say in response or how you can justifiably comport yourself with him. While you may be the expert in the room, your expertise does not entitle you to treat the student or his ideas dismissively or rudely (for a similar case, see Priest 2017: 467). Here, the limitation in question is intellectual, not in the sense that it is a feature of your intellect, but in the sense that it constrains how you can use or deploy your noetic equipment. Moreover, the limitation is such that, if you accept it by, say, choosing to listen patiently and charitably to your student's fledging ideas, your intellectual conduct might manifest IH.

These examples bear on an earlier point concerning the intuitive connection between IH and various positive interpersonal attitudes and actions. We noted that some writers have sought to *define* IH in terms of these interpersonal qualities. While we have considered several reasons for thinking this move is unwarranted, we are now in a better position to see what is right about it. While IH is essentially and fundamentally a matter of owning one's intellectual limitations, such limitations can include ways that our intellectual conduct is limited or constrained by the epistemic rights or well-being of others, such that to exemplify IH, we must accept the relevant constraints on our conduct and treat others in ways that are, at a minimum, intellectually respectful. Conversely, treating other epistemic agents disrespectfully can constitute a failure of IH, not because IH is essentially or definitionally a matter of respecting the epistemic rights of others, but because a failure to respect others' epistemic rights can also be a failure to appropriately attend to and accept the ways in which these rights limit and constrain our own intellectual conduct.

### 3.4. Unity Revisited

The preceding discussion underscores a further way—in addition to the ways identified earlier in the paper—in which IH might be “unified” with other virtues. In particular, it illustrates how a single action, thought, or attitude can manifest or be expressive of both IH and one or more other intellectual virtues. Suppose, for example, that while listening to the student discussed above, you make a conscious decision to refrain from dismissing or making a condescending remark about one of his more ill-formed objections, and that you do so out of a sense that your expertise in the area would not justify such a response. *Qua* instance of LO, this is an act of IH. *Qua* instance of giving another person’s ideas the attention and consideration they deserve, it is an act of intellectual respect. A similar point applies to the scenario in which I undertake a foolish and irrational measure to try to overcome my lack of an internet connection. To the extent that this behavior reveals an internal resistance to my intellectual limitations, it is likely to indicate a failure of IH. And to the extent that it expresses an unwillingness to wait patiently, it is likely to indicate a lack of intellectual patience.

### Conclusion

We now have before us a much fuller sense of the kinds of intellectual limitations an ownership of which can exemplify IH. In addition to providing a richer and more complex account of the nature of IH, the discussion also makes clear why, even on the LO account, IH is robustly interpersonal. This is so, not only because IH is *predictive* of the presence (or absence) of certain positive (or negative) interpersonal attitudes and behaviors, or may even be *unified* with other virtues, but also because the limitations an ownership of which can be expressive of IH are themselves deeply relational and interpersonal, such that owning them places significant interpersonal demands on our intellectual conduct.

## Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the John Templeton Foundation grant “Developing the intellectual virtues for research in Science and the Big Questions in Latin America” (ID#62110). The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

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