

# Intellectual Humility in Public Discourse

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## *Literature Review*

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## Introduction

One thing we all seem to agree on is that, increasingly, we don't agree on very much. Fundamental and extremely divisive disagreement over religion, morality and science is pervasive in our culture. Against that background, *The Intellectual Humility in Public Discourse Project* (IHPD) aims to understand the relationship between two values, both of which seem crucial for an open civil society: intellectual humility or open-mindedness on the one hand; and meaningful public discourse, or discourse responsive to reasons, on the other.

That the relationship between these values merits serious scrutiny can be illustrated by a simple puzzle: *How is it possible to combine principled commitment—the sort of commitment people show on issues such as religion or morality—with intellectual humility about those very commitments?* In other words, how does one remain loyal to personally held beliefs while being open to the possibility of being wrong? This puzzle underpins one of the big questions that will guide the project's research initiatives. Answering it fully requires confronting another question: *What are barriers to intellectually humble discourse?* In tackling this second question, the project aims to address foundational challenges to public discourse on the individual and collective levels: e.g. the role of implicit bias in preventing people from engaging in constructive dialogue, and the ways in which

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manipulative use of language can stymie the public exchange of reasons. As such, IHPD hopes to clear the conceptual underbrush to reveal fully the role of intellectual humility in helping our culture achieve more meaningful public discourse. Taken together, these framing questions link the project's humanistic scholarship to real-world challenges.

Questions about the nature of, and challenges to, public discourse have been traditionally addressed by social scientists and political philosophers; but in recent years, philosophers have begun fruitfully applying the lessons of epistemology and the philosophy of language to these issues as well. In what follows, and in line with the PI's principal research focus, we provide an overview of the epistemological and, to a lesser extent, the cognitive science literature most relevant to the above framing questions. Given the scope of the project, even a limited review of the relevant literature cannot hope to be exhaustive. Our aim is more modest: to provide an informed summary of existing research that frames the background of our proposed project.

The review is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides an overview of recent work on intellectual humility. Part 2 discusses research pertaining to potential barriers to meaningful public discourse bearing on the basic questions of the grant.

## 1. The Concept of Intellectual Humility

### 1.0 Kinds of Models

Much of the current philosophical literature of intellectual humility concerns how best to characterize or define the concept. One emerging disagreement between researchers working on intellectual humility concerns differing *kinds* of models of the concept. One camp takes "IH" to name a distinct and unified kind of psychological trait. We'll call this sort of view *IH realism*. The other camp takes "IH" to name a cluster or family of features that are domain-specific in their application. We'll call this sort of view *IH pluralism*. Below, we discuss both kinds of positions and briefly discuss how these views may inform discussion of public discourse.

### 1.1 IH Realism: Expanding the concept of humility

Humility (intellectual or otherwise) is largely discussed within the virtue-theoretic tradition (Byerly 2014; Church 2015; Church and Samuelson forthcoming; Garcia 2006; Grenberg 2005; Hazlett 2012; Kidd 2014, forthcoming-b, forthcoming-a; Sinha 2012; Whitcomb et al. 2015). Humility in general is often described as a kind of positive character trait or disposition (Annas 2011; Battaly 2009, 2015). Hence one natural view is that intellectual humility is humility with respect to intellectual and epistemic matters. If one takes humility itself to be a unified trait or disposition, it is natural to take intellectual humility to be similar. Call views of this sort IH realism.

One major disagreement within this camp concerns the content of the relevant trait i.e. what it is that an intellectually humble person *qua* intellectually humble possesses. A seminal early account, given by Roberts and Wood (2003, 2013), is that the intellectually humble person is disposed to be unconcerned with the social status that comes with having one's peers or social group attribute intellectual talents to one. Thus, on the Roberts-Wood view, intellectual humility is the virtuous counterpart to the vices of intellectual haughtiness or vanity. However, the Roberts-Wood view can be criticized on the grounds that the kind of lack of concern they claim is sufficient for intellectual humility can be manifested by vicious behaviors: by being self-absorbed in the extreme (Garcia 2006, p. 423), or by being intellectually timid (Hazlett 2012, p. 220) or diffident (Church 2015, p. 2).

This is not to say that the opposition to the Roberts-Wood view is uniform. Hazlett and Church both endorse higher-order doxastic approaches to humility (i.e. where an intellectually humble person has the appropriate doxastic attitudes towards their own epistemic states). On Hazlett's view, for example, intellectual humility is "excellence in attributing ignorance to yourself, withholding attributing knowledge to yourself and questioning whether you know" (Hazlett 2015). On the other hand, Garcia (2006) and Whitcomb et al (2015) hold that humility requires more than the right kinds of beliefs, but also the right kind of affective dispositions. Thus, Garcia characterizes humility as being unimpressed with oneself, whereas Whitcomb et al characterize intellectual humility as

appropriately owning one's intellectual limitations, distinguishing it from what they take to be related but distinct traits, such as open-mindedness.

A second major difference between these accounts is whether they define intellectual humility to be a virtue. The Robert-Woods account clearly does, as does Hazlett's (2015). But not all IH realists do, as Whitcomb et al make clear. One reason not to do so is that, as these authors argue, one might be **intellectually** humble for the wrong reasons. Thus, on their view, for example, one might appropriately attend to and own one's own intellectual limitations, but do so out of a desire to, e.g., seem cooperative as opposed to wanting to pursue the truth.

IH realist views are attractive because they promise a theoretically unified account of intellectual humility. But each such view is also vulnerable to the charge that it is not "describing" a pre-existing natural mental state but rather is sharpening or extending a looser concept that names a cluster of related states.

## 1.2 IH Pluralism: A family of features

A second major approach to intellectual humility stems, not surprisingly, from a different way of conceiving of humility proper. On this second kind of view, the concept of humility is a polythetic or family-resemblance concept (Kellenberger 2010). Polythetic concepts do not name unified kinds that can be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, such concepts pick out kinds whose members share most but not all of an overlapping family of features, none of which is necessary and sufficient for belonging to the kind. This view of humility is explicitly defended by Kellenberger, but also appears implicitly in (Tangney 2009) where she remarks that the "key elements" of humility include:

... an accurate assessment of one's abilities and achievements (not low self-esteem, self-deprecation), an ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often vis-à-vis a higher power); openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice; keeping one's abilities and accomplishments—one's place in the world—in perspective...; a relatively low self-focus, a "forgetting of the self," while

recognizing that one is but a part of the larger universe; an appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to the world.

This is a diverse list, including a variety of mental states. One might then define intellectual humility as simply a similarly diverse set (or subset)—such as acknowledging one’s cognitive mistakes, being open to evidence, owning one’s intellectual limitations, being appropriately skeptical and so on. On these views, there is a single concept of intellectual humility, but it can be used to pick out any of these mental states without there being any single feature that all and only those traits share in common.

While IH pluralism obviously sacrifices theoretical unity, it does have some precedent in epistemology, aligning with more pluralist accounts of knowledge (Sosa 2009) and justification (Alston 2005). Moreover, it captures the intuition that there are different ways to be intellectually humble. One can exemplify the trait by being anti-dogmatic, or proportioning your conviction to the evidence (Kelly 2008), or by being aware of your tendencies toward bias. Moreover, it fits well with the thought (Raimi and Leary 2014; Tangney 2009) that intellectual humility is “domain-specific.” That is, a person can be intellectually humble in one context, or with regard to some subject, and not be in another context, or with regard to another subject.

### **1.3 Intellectual Humility and Deliberative Discourse**

As we are defining it here, meaningful public discourse is discourse that involves the public exchange of, and responsiveness to, reasons. Thus meaningful public discourse is deliberative. As such, it is arguably a central democratic value. When decisions must be made that will affect a number of free and equal adults, those adults ought to be able to deliberate about what to do. This, at least, is the intuition that supports many of our civil institutions. As Rawls puts it, “the exchange of opinion with others checks our partiality and widens our perspective; we are made to see things from their standpoint and the limits of our vision are brought home to us.... Discussion is a way of combining information and enlarging the range of arguments” (Rawls 2009: 358-59). This intuition,

indeed, is at the heart of the commitment to deliberative democracy, to the formation of committees, and to many other ways in which we decide as a group about group matters (Elster 1998).

Deliberation via the exchange of reasons has a clear tie to intellectual humility, whether it is defined in the realist or pluralist sense. A sincere participant in political deliberation is someone who is willing, as Rawls says, to check her partiality and widen her perspective. Indeed, the tie is even inherent in the most famous thought experiment in recent political philosophy, Rawls's famous "original position." Rawls's idea, roughly, is that the principles of justice are those that would be agreed upon behind a hypothetical "veil of ignorance," where we are ignorant of the social, racial and political statuses that typically cause bias in our political decisions. The original position, in other words, might be described as the position from which we can make intellectually open and humble decisions about the distribution of resources.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Barriers to Meaningful Public Discourse**

### **2.0 Overview**

Meaningful public discourse, as defined above, is clearly a central democratic value. But recent work in philosophy and cognitive science in particular has shown that the existence of such discourse in our culture faces not only political challenges, it faces conceptual and psychological ones as well. Below, we discuss three general kinds of barriers to the productive exchange of reasons.

### **2.1 Disagreement and Commitment**

It often happens that people disagree even when they are equally well informed about the issues. What should we do when we find ourselves in such a situation—should we revise our opinions, or stick to our guns?

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Paul Bloomfield for this point.

In recent years, there has been a significant amount of work on this question in epistemology. But that work, by and large, has been largely focused on simplified, uncontroversial examples. This approach has some merit—it helps to abstract from what can be distracting real-world complications; but it also begs the question of how to apply the lessons we take from it.

The simple cases do allow us to spell out the options. Suppose, for instance, you've come to believe that Paul Cezanne was the most influential post-impressionistic painter. You've formed this belief on the basis of good evidence: you've read up on art history, maybe been to museums, etc. Now, imagine that Anne tells you, "No, George Seurat was really more influential." What ought you to do? Do you abandon your belief? Remain confident? Become agnostic?

The rational response to a disagreement like this depends largely on who Anne is. If Anne is an art history professor or other expert, then it is probably irrational for you remain as confident in light of her disagreement. If Anne is a novice, then you're probably not rationally bound to change your belief. If, however Anne has equally good evidence as you do, if she's just as good at making inferences based on that evidence, then what you ought to do is less clear. In philosophy, this is typically called *the problem of peer disagreement*.

The problem of peer disagreement is obviously relevant to the question of how to combine intellectual humility and allegiance to one's own commitments. More generally it raises the question of what norms should be operative in public discourse over divisive issues.

There are two main approaches to peer disagreement that appear in the literature: the conciliatory view and the steadfast view. According to the conciliatory view, to be rational you must become less confident in your belief when Anne, your peer, disagrees with you (D. Christensen 2007; Elga 2007; Feldman 2007). This conclusion is based on the observation that Anne's testimony is evidence against your belief. Countervailing evidence rationally requires a change in belief. How much you should change your belief (i.e., must you become entirely agnostic? Must you change your belief to Anne's?) depends on the details of the conciliatory view in question. However, all conciliatory views agree that,

when faced with Anne's testimony, it is irrational for you to remain as confident in your belief that Cezanne was the most influential.

Proponents of steadfast views, however, think that one is not rationally obligated to change one's belief in light of peer disagreement. Instead, they hold that, faced with a disagreeing peer, it is rationally permissible to remain confident in one's belief (Kelly 2010; Lord 2014). One motivation for steadfast views is the intuition that there can be more than one rational response to a single set of evidence (Horowitz 2014; Rosen 2001; Schoenfield 2014).

Despite deep differences, the conciliatory and steadfast views generally agree that, in the event of peer disagreement, one can rationally discount the peer's view if said peer has a bias that would confound their better judgment. In short, both approaches would seem to implicitly endorse the thesis that *debunking strategies*—ones that attempt to show the other side to be biased—are rational responses to peer disagreement. However, Ballantyne (2015) argues that the best debunking strategies fail, since current psychology shows that we lack the cognitive abilities required for the success of the debunking strategies. For example, the "self-exculpating" strategy requires that we detect no confounding bias in ourselves. However, research shows that we have a "bias blind spot": we cannot easily tell through introspection whether we are biased (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Wilson and Brekke 1994). Thus, we should not readily employ the self-exculpating strategy to debunk our opponents, since it is unlikely that we are successfully detecting a lack of bias in our judgments. Similar considerations hold for all other debunking strategies. If Ballantyne is right, this assumption held by both conciliatory and steadfast views fails.

While these are the two main approaches to peer disagreement, there are important views that fall into neither category. One such view is known as the *justificationist* position. Justificationists hold that when faced with a disagreeing peer the rational response depends on one's degree of justification (Lackey 2008, 2013) (see (Simpson 2013) and (Vavova 2014) for discussion). If neither you nor Anne is very justified then you ought to decrease your credence. If you're both justified, then you both ought to



remain confident. Thus, the justificationist holds a view that sometimes echoes the conciliatory view, and sometimes the steadfast view.

There are confounding factors to the above approaches to peer disagreement. For one, it is not clear what it takes to be in a peer disagreement. Is my peer someone who has *just as good* evidence as I have, or someone who has *the very same* evidence as I have? Must I *recognize my peer*, or can she simply be my peer *in fact* (D. Christensen 2009; Goldberg 2013; King 2012)? Another confounding worry is the nature of belief – must I change from believing to disbelieving when my peer disagrees? Or may I simply reduce my credence in my belief (Enoch 2010)? These factors, and others, complicate the current approaches to peer disagreement, and the approaches differ in how these factors are addressed.

Even more importantly, not all forms of disagreement that are relevant to profound disagreements over science and religion are best described as peer disagreements. Disagreements over the facts can often become disagreements over whose view is best supported by the evidence, and disagreements over whose view is best supported by the evidence can spiral down into debates over whose view of what counts as good evidence for the matter at hand is the right one. When disagreements reach this point, they concern explicitly epistemic commitments. An *epistemic commitment* is a commitment to a principle with explicit epistemic content (Lynch 2013). Epistemic commitments to the reliability or trustworthiness of particular methods for forming justified beliefs are one kind of epistemic commitment. Commitments can be general or more specific. An example of the general kind would be a commitment to induction being a reliable method for forming beliefs; an example of the latter kind would be a commitment to abduction from the fossil and historical record being the best method for forming beliefs about early life on Earth (Lynch 2012).

Both Lynch and Pritchard (Pritchard 2010, 2013) have argued that disagreements over commitments of this sort are not best characterized as “peer” disagreements, in part because it will be difficult for either party to recognize the other as possessing the same evidence, because the methods for forming beliefs which you think are reliable will determine which

methods for generating evidence you take as reliable. On this view, such disagreements are better understood as involving a type of epistemic incommensurability. The existence of such incommensurability is clearly a threat to meaningful public discourse and any political action that hinges on it. If we can't agree on whose methods of inquiry are correct, then it is hard to see how we could agree whose view of the facts is correct. And if we can't agree on the facts, we can hardly agree on what to do in light of the facts. Consequently, if cultural debates sometimes hinge on disagreements of this sort, it is no wonder that constructive dialogue and action grind to a halt.

## 2.2 Group Polarization and Deliberation

Earlier we noted that there are clear political and ethical reasons to value deliberation. But one challenge to the value and meaningfulness of deliberation concerns whether deliberation has *epistemic* value. How much, in other words, does deliberation help us with respect to knowledge?

It is clear from the psychological and sociological work on group deliberation that there is no simple answer to this question (Kerr and Tindale 2004). The epistemic value of deliberation is nuanced and subtle. Furthermore, some of the data on group deliberation is surprising. For one, contrary to what Rawls suggests, deliberating groups don't become more moderate by deliberating together. Instead, the trend is that when there is even a little agreement in a group, the group tends to polarize – that is, the end consensus is more extreme than many of the initial views held by group members (Sunstein 2000). Members of deliberating groups are also often reluctant to share information that differs or contravenes the consensus of the group (Gigone and Hastie 1993). This can result in the reinforcement of entrenched ideas – not because of the ideas' accuracy, but because of group social dynamics (Sunstein and Hastie 2014). (See also data about information cascades (Bjerring et al. 2014).)

Another concern about the epistemic value of deliberation stems from a phenomenon called *pluralistic ignorance*. Pluralistic ignorance

emerges when there is a discrepancy between what group members believe and what they claim publically to believe – that is, between individual level beliefs and group level beliefs (Bjerring et al. 2014). At a first glance, this discrepancy appears to be a failure of rationality, perhaps due to social influence or peer pressure (though this point is contested ((Christoff and Hansen 2013)). So here, too, deliberation fails to have clear epistemic value.

These psychological and sociological observations about deliberation seem to challenge the idea that deliberation is an unmixed epistemic good. Deliberation between small groups – perhaps groups within larger groups – *can* offer epistemic benefits. This kind of deliberation is sometimes called *enclave deliberation* (Sunstein 2000). Whereas unpopular or minority positions are often ignored in large heterogeneous groups (C. Christensen and Abbott 2003), small homogeneous groups can provide a receptive audience for such positions. Enclave deliberation can strengthen the positions of those who might otherwise be unfairly disenfranchised or silenced (Jacobs 2000).

There is much more to be said about the epistemic risks and benefits of group deliberation. From the forgoing, however, this much is clear: whatever social and political benefits accrue from deliberation, the epistemic value thereof is complex and nuanced. Despite our intuition as to the value of deliberation, we need to take into account the trends and data about how well groups who deliberate preform, and what factors affect this performance.

### 2.3 Psychology and Reasons

The problems of peer disagreement and group deliberation threaten to undermine reason, but additional, more direct challenges to reason come from social scientists and psychologists. Widespread biases in human psychology seem to undercut the role we want reasoning to have. Recall the discussion of Ballantyne above: we often fail to detect bias in ourselves, yet are too eager to attribute bias to others.

However, the bias blind spot is but one among many obstacles in human psychology to reasoning, as Gendler (2011) argues. According to her, “The existence of race as a category that gives rise to certain sorts of

automatic associations is hazardous, even for those who disavow the normative content of those associations” (Gendler 2011: 57). Gendler discusses phenomena like stereotype threat, wherein? the salience of negative stereotypes surrounding a group with which you self-identify causes your performance on a task to suffer. But the kinds of implicit biases against others that Gendler is concerned with have far-reaching effects. Fricker (2007), for instance, argues that implicit biases against a racial group cause us to downgrade the testimony from members of said group. For example, if a group is stereotyped as untrustworthy, then the stereotype can lead those familiar with the stereotype to treat members of the group as less credible, even if they reject the stereotype. Thus, if Fricker is right, implicit biases stand in the way of listening to the reasons that certain others give us.

But reasons may not matter as much as we like to think, as Jonathan Haidt suggests. (See also (Uhlmann et al. 2009) and (Graham et al. 2011).) Haidt’s work exposes some of the psychological causes of our divisions in values, and this work he claims, shows that reason as depicted by philosophers is a “rationalist delusion”. As he puts it, “Anyone who values truth should stop worshipping reason. We all need to take a cold hard look at the evidence and see reasoning for what it is” (Haidt 2012: 89). Haidt sees two points about reasoning to be particularly important. First, reasons are often less effective than non-rational, affective factors. Second, the public exchange of reasons in argument is less about rational debate than persuasion. If Haidt is right, then we not only have something of an explanation for why public discourse is so divisive, but also a lesson for what to do about it. Reasons will not work. If peace is in the offing, it is going to have to come about some other way.

On the first point, consider Haidt’s research on “moral dumbfounding.” Presented with a story about consensual, protected sex between an adult brother and sister – sex which is never repeated, and which is protected by birth control – most people in the studies reacted with feelings of disgust, judging that the encounter is wrong. But while subjects struggled to defend such feelings with arguments when questioned by researchers, they continued to hold their views. According to Haidt, the moral intuitions demonstrated here are wholly explained by

the emotional gut reactions: the defenses offered were post-hoc rationalizations, not the results of reasoning proper.

Data like this should give us pause, but the lesson they proffer is not obvious. The inability of people to be immediately articulate about their judgment does not show that the judgment is the outcome of non-rational process, or even that they lack reasons for their view. Intuitions, moral or otherwise, can be the result of sources that can be rationally evaluated and calibrated (Flanagan and Williams 2010; Kahneman 2011). Moreover, rational deliberation is not a switch to be thrown on or off. It is a process, and therefore many of its effects would have to be measured over time. Tellingly, the participants in Haidt's original harmless taboo studies study had little time to deliberate. But as other studies have suggested when people are given more time to reflect, they *can* change their beliefs to fit the evidence, even when those beliefs might be initially emotionally uncomfortable to them.

As to Haidt's second point, he endorses what he calls a Glauconian view of reasoning about value, referencing a question from Plato: What would you do with a ring of invisibility? In Plato's *The Republic*, the character Glaucon asks this question to illustrate the idea that it is merely the fear of being caught that makes us behave, not a desire for justice. Haidt takes from Glaucon's parable a general lesson about the value of defending our views with reasons: those who defend their views with reasons are not really after the truth. As the cognitive scientists Mercier and Sperber put it, what the reasoners are really after—whether they acknowledge it or not—are arguments supporting their already entrenched views (Mercier and Sperber 2011). If that is the case, then even if appeals to evidence are sometimes effective in changing our values over time, such change is only attributable to the fact that the reasons themselves are aimed at manipulating others into agreeing with us, not at uncovering the facts. To think otherwise is to once again fall into the rationalist delusion.

In giving reasons we certainly aim to get others to agree with us, which is a good thing, as is searching out effective means of reaching agreement. But it is less clear that we can coherently represent ourselves as *only* aiming to get others to agree with us Consider the difficulty in

being skeptical about the role of rationality in our lives today. The judgment that reasons play a weak role in judgment is itself a judgment. And the skeptic has defended that judgment with reasons. So if those reasons persuade me of the skeptic's theory despite my intuitive feelings to the contrary, then reasons *can* play a trumping role in judgment—contra Haidt's theory. Remember the passage quoted above in this context: "those who love truth need to take a good hard look at the evidence and see reasoning for what it is." This sounds like a self-defeating argument: we are being advised to use reason to see that reason is flawed.

One might say that the reasons to accept views like Haidt's are not value judgments, but scientific claims. But science itself presupposes certain values: truth, objectivity, and epistemic principles—principles that give us our standards of rationality. Moreover, outside of mathematics it is rare that the data is so conclusive that there is just one conclusion we can draw.<sup>3</sup> Usually the data admits of more than interpretation or explanation. And that means that we must infer, or judge, what we think is the case. And where there is judgment, there are values in the background. Hence the point: arguing (with reasons) that reason never plays a role in value judgments is apt to be self-defeating.

There is a larger point to make? here. Even if we *could* start seeing ourselves as only giving reasons to manipulate, it is unclear that we *should*. Suppose there was a drug that, once dropped in the water supply, would make most folks agree with one's own political views. While administering such a drug would be tempting, doing so would be wrong in the very way that we think the sleaziest political ads are wrong. Again, to engage in public discourse means seeing others as equal autonomous agents capable of making up their own minds. This suggests that if we want to see ourselves as engaging in sincere public deliberation, we owe each other reasons for our political actions, as using force and

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<sup>3</sup> Even here it is difficult, as debates over the Continuum Hypothesis (or the idea that there is no set of real numbers whose size or cardinality is intermediate between the reals and the naturals) show. Thanks to Nathan Kellen for this point.

manipulation to further our positions is to fail to treat others as autonomous equals.

### 3. Conclusion

The above discussion is hardly exhaustive. But it helps to explain why the fundamental questions with which we began are both so perplexing and intuitively important. There is a deep connection between intellectual humility and meaningful public discourse – indeed, such discourse, as the Rawlsian position suggests, is intellectually humble by nature. And yet at the same time, there are fundamental challenges to the very possibility of such rational dialogue, challenges that have yet to be overcome.

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