



Is humility a good thing?

Almost as a reflex Christians will say “yes.” If support is needed they might point to Micah 6:8, which says, “He has showed you, O man, what is good....To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Walk humbly *with God*? Of course. What argument is needed once we acknowledge the infinite distance between ourselves as creatures and God as almighty creator, ourselves with a bent to sin and God as surpassingly holy?

But what about walking humbly with *other human beings*? Is that a good thing?

As I write this, the Winter Olympics are on. If you are like me, you watch in awe of the athletes. The discipline, the prowess, the determination, the finely honed skills of all who made it. And if you’re like me, you are cheering on your nation’s athletes, hoping they do you proud. (btw, I can’t believe that the Canadians didn’t get the gold in pairs figure skating.) The olympic dream! Standing on the highest step of the podium. You don’t expect to hear much about humility in this context.

We begin to understand why Aristotle regarded humility as a vice rather than a virtue. He saw humility as “small-spiritedness.” As far as he was concerned, humble people lack ambition, and don’t dare to dream of going for the gold. “These people hold back from fine actions and practices, and equally from external goods, because they think they are unworthy of them.”

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Other critics have said humility is bad because it encourages dishonesty and damages self-esteem. Norvin Richards writes, “in the popular conception, humility consists in having a low opinion of yourself, or, possibly, in underestimating yourself. Humble people are expected to be modest and self-deprecating. They are supposed to say ‘It was nothing, really,’ when we all think it was marvellous.”

At its extreme this behavior can be quite destructive, as Henri Nouwen makes clear in writing about a low point in his life. “I am tempted to wallow in my own lostness and lose touch with my original goodness, my God-given humanity, my basic blessedness, and thus allow the powers of death to take charge. This happens over and over again whenever I say to myself: ‘I am no good. I am useless. I am worthless. I am unlovable. I am a nobody.’ There are always countless events and situations that I can single out to convince myself and others that my life is just not worth living, that I am only a burden, a problem, a source of conflict, or an exploiter of other people’s time and energy.” Such humility—or should we call it self-humiliation?—is spiritually, psychologically and ethically bad.

On the other hand, there is a kind of humility that is ethically good and very important in our relationships with other human beings. Humility that is good makes one open to other people, ready to appreciate their gifts, and therefore willing to collaborate with them. This kind of humility stands in contrast to prideful arrogance.

Norvin Richards may be right to say there is a kind of humility that is inherently dishonest, but there is the equally dishonest pride that says “I am self-sufficient. I am

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capable. I don't need you." It is dishonest because no one actually is that independent. Whether we want to admit it or not, we need each other at every turn. Those who are humble in a good way are aware of this and welcome it. Despite what Aristotle feared, their humility doesn't make them shy away from attempting daring accomplishments, but it does make them realize that success depends on the efforts of many, not just one.

To honor others, to appreciate them, to care about them, to welcome the contributions they make to one's own life requires a wholesome humility. It's the kind of humility the apostle Paul called the "mind of Christ."

Jesus was not self-negating, but he was willing to get on his knees. And so should we be. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4)

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12 February 2002