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Intellectual humility without limits: Magnanimous humility, disagreement and the epistemology of resistance

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Abstract

In this paper, I provide a characterisation of a neglected form of humility: magnanimous humility. Unlike most contemporary analyses of humility, magnanimous humility is not about limitations but instead presupposes that one possesses some entitlement in a context. I suggest that magnanimous intellectual humility (IH) consists in a disposition to appropriately refrain from exercising one's legitimate epistemic entitlements because one is appropriately motivated to pursue some epistemic good. I then shown that Magnanimous IH has an important role to play in contexts of disagreement and oppression. It calls on knowing parties to refrain from pressing their epistemic entitlements to facilitate mutual understanding. And it is a virtue that oppressed persons have good reason to cultivate in order to develop meta-lucidity in themselves and others.

KEYWORDS

Humility, Intellectual Humility, Assertion, Knowledge, Disagreement, Epistemology of Resistance

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In the fall of 2011, Matthew Stevenson invited Derek Black to a weekly Shabbat dinner at his apartment.¹ Stevenson and Black were college students at New College but were very different people. Black was a young leader in the white nationalist movement and had started his own radio program to promote white nationalist ideas (including claims about racial IQ differences and the oppression of white people). Stevenson, on the other hand, was an Orthodox Jew who had personally experienced the antisemitism that stemmed from the white nationalists and their precursors. Stevenson's invitation was the only friendly overture Black had received since his public exposure as a white nationalist. The dinners continued regularly with a diverse group of people, including Allison Gornik and Moshe Ash, and initial suspicion led to discussions where Derek was gently asked about his views and challenged as he listened to other guests. In 2013, Derek eventually decided to renounce white nationalism.

This moving display of reconciliation amidst disagreement stands in contrast to much of today's ugly polarised world. Of the many virtues exemplified by both parties in this exchange, *humility* seems to stand out. However, the two parties displayed different kinds of humility. Black displayed a courageous form of humility in patiently listening to others as they challenged his views and in admitting publicly that he was mistaken. Stevenson too displays humility in inviting Black into his personal space, in hearing him out, and in gently challenging him instead of outright rejecting his claims. However, the structure of their respective virtues is different. Black's humility consisted in recognising his limitations and receiving correction. Stevenson's humility, however, had little to do with limitations, but involved humbling himself in gentle engagement.

To coin terms, Black displays *self-accepting* humility whereas Stevenson displays *magnanimous* humility. Contemporary analyses have focused on self-accepting humility to the neglect of magnanimous humility. In this paper, I want to characterise magnanimous humility. My aim is to capture a form of humility that has been insufficiently noticed² or improperly described, with a focus on the intellectual variant of humility and its value in contexts of disagreement and oppression.

I will begin by surveying the literature and suggesting that magnanimous humility involves a disposition to appropriately refrain from one's rightful entitlements to pursue moral or epistemic goods (§1). I then explore the relationship between this virtue and one epistemic entitlement: the entitlement to assert when we meet the knowledge norm of assertion. Situations of deep disagreement where we are the knowing party are contexts where we are epistemically entitled to make assertions but where magnanimous humility might bid us refrain from asserting (§2). Finally, I examine the importance of magnanimous humility for oppressed and marginalised subjects. Some philosophers have complained that it is counterproductive to recommend humility to downtrodden subjects. By engaging with Medina's epistemology of resistance, I suggest instead that magnanimous humility might have much going for it (§3).

1 | MAGNANIMOUS HUMILITY

Let me begin by offering my formulation of magnanimous humility:

Magnanimous Humility: Magnanimous humility consists in a disposition to appropriately refrain from exercising the legitimate authority or entitlement that one has

¹ (Saslow, 2016)

² As Byerly (2014) notes, it can be fruitful to examine various formulations of humility and examine the goods they help us to achieve instead of fixating on giving the analysis of the one true virtue of humility.

due to some superior status one possesses because one is appropriately motivated to pursue broadly moral goods.³

This is the humility that Stevenson demonstrates in his interaction with Black: a willingness to engage with him personally and in joint inquiry, even though he was entitled to refuse to do either. I now contrast this with other contemporary formulations to show its distinctness.

1.1 | Formulations of humility

Generalising somewhat, most contemporary accounts are accounts of a form of humility that I will call self-accepting humility.⁴ This is the form of humility that is exemplified by Derek Black. It is a virtue of self-assessment (Tanesini, 2018, 2021) that amounts to taking a cognitive and affective stance towards one's valuable capacities that involves either realistically moderating one's views of one's strengths or of seriously reckoning with one's limitations. For example, Nancy Snow (1995) claims that "Humility can be defined as the disposition to allow the awareness of and concern about your limitations to have a realistic influence on your attitudes and behaviour" (210). One prominent recent account of intellectual humility, the limitations-owning account, put forward by Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr and Howard-Snyder (2017) claims that intellectual humility consists in proper attentiveness to, and owning of, one's intellectual limitations. To own one's limitations involves dispositions both to have accurate beliefs about one's limitations and to affectively reckon with them.

This approach to humility has a long tradition. Aquinas (1920, ST II-II Q. 161) describes humility as the virtue that serves "to temper and restrain the mind lest it tend to high things immoderately", and we can hear a pre-cursor of the limitations-owning account when he describes humility's manifestation as, "a man, considering his own failings, assumes the lowest place according to his mode". Secular formulations of the virtue have excavated humility from its theological context but understand it in terms of a proper recognition of our limits.

Self-accepting humility is important. However, I suggest that another form of humility also deserves attention. Interestingly, this virtue also holds a prominent place in Christianity. We notice it in thinking about the humility of Christ. Thus, St Paul:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but

³ Callahan (2021, 2024) has recently objected to accounts of humility that include as part of their formulation the qualification that some trait is manifested 'appropriately' in a context-sensitive way. This qualification is necessary because, following Aristotelian tradition, the exercise of virtue necessarily requires some degree of discernment and practical wisdom (this need not be manifested in explicit deliberation but can show up in implicit skilfulness). It is out of the scope of this paper to discuss her objections to such a qualification, but I want to note that even on Callahan's account discernment is necessary for humility. Callahan casts the humble person as one who is free from vicious pride. What counts as vicious pride, on her view, is pride that distracts from more important tasks. This means that what is vicious pride can vary widely from context to context and manifesting humility will require the agent's discernment. I discuss Callahan's proposal in greater detail in §3.2.

⁴ I have adapted this term from (Tanesini, 2018).

emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8)

How should we describe Christ's humility? If we are to understand this in terms of self-accepting humility, that would suggest that the incarnation and crucifixion involve Christ accepting the consequences of his limitations. Surely, however, the beauty of the incarnation and crucifixion must be a product of the fact that the Son of God had no relevant failings⁵ that would require him to subject himself to humiliation.⁶ Rather his humility presupposed his exalted status. The early church father John Chrysostom, commenting on this passage, notes:

What then is humility? To be lowly minded. And he is lowly minded who humbles himself, not he who is lowly by necessity. To explain what I say; and do ye attend; he who is lowly minded, when he has it in his power to be high minded, is humble, but he who is so because he is not able to be high minded, is no longer humble. For instance, If a King subjects himself to his own officer, he is humble, for he descends from his high estate; but if an officer does so, he will not be lowly minded; for how? He has not humbled himself from any high estate. It is not possible to show humble-mindedness except it be in our power to do otherwise. (Chrysostom, 1889)

What is crucial here is giving up something that was in one's power, where one possesses that power due to some superiority in status. In Chrysostom's analogy, the officer who subjects himself to the king does not display the humility that the king displays as he freely subjects himself to his officer. Now Chrysostom's talk of 'power' is ambiguous between the ability to do something and one's right or entitlement to do that thing. I suggest that both are necessary for this sort of humility. The humble king has power both *de facto* and *de jure*. His decision to lower himself despite possessing both ability and entitlement is what manifests his humility.⁷

I suggest that we christen this *magnanimous* humility. How should we characterise magnanimous humility? In contrast to self-accepting humility's focus on limitations, magnanimous humility is a virtue that can only be displayed in contexts where the agent has an entitlement that

⁵ See also (Austin, 2018; Murphy, 2021) for the claim that we must not think of divine humility as presupposing any defect in God.

⁶ It is close to Christmas, and it strikes me that Christ's magnanimous humility is the theme of many carols, e.g. *Our God heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain/ Heaven and Earth shall flee away when he comes to reign/ In the bleak mid-winter a stable place sufficed/ For the Lord God Almighty; Jesus Christ.*

⁷ It would be worth comparing my account of humility here with Murphy's (Murphy, 2021) account of divine humility. According to Murphy, God displays humility in his dealings with creation when he refrains from acting on reasons of status to act on reasons of creaturely goods. What is important for Murphy's account is that God's reasons for status are both genuine normative reasons and are never outweighed by reasons of creaturely goodness. This means that God is not rationally required to refrain from acting on reasons of status in order to act on reasons of creaturely goodness—to think so would be to fail to recognise the supreme importance of his holy status. God's status as holy grounds his freedom from being rationally required to compromise his status in acting for creaturely goodness. To put this in terms of my formulation of magnanimous humility, God has a legitimate entitlement not to deal with creation and compromise his exalted, holy status. In his benevolent dealings with creation, including the decision to become incarnate, God thus refrains from exercising some of those entitlements in order pursue other goods that he is not rationally required to pursue. There is thus much affinity between my formulation of magnanimous humility and Murphy's. One advantage of my formulation, however, is that it doesn't rely on Murphy's technical and somewhat idiosyncratic notion of reasons of status. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to say more and directing me to Murphy's account of divine humility.

others lack due to some superior feature they possess. Indeed, my chosen adjective is intended to connect it to the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity (*megalopsychos*). As Aristotle noted, possession of the virtue of magnanimity is only possible for the person who is “worthy of great things” (Aristotle, 2005, NE 4.3) and accordingly does and demands great things in accordance with her status. By contrast “[t]he person who is worthy of little and thinks himself to be such is temperate, but not [magnanimous]”. Only those who are properly entitled in some aspect can be magnanimous.

On Aristotle’s view, the magnanimous person will demand great honours in accordance with their greatness. Some have therefore thought that the Christian virtue of humility was foreign to Aristotle and only made sense within a theological framework where we are vastly inferior to God. I suggest that the contrast is rather located in a different place. Magnanimous humility does not consist in cringing or in denying one’s superiority, rather it presupposes a proper sense of one’s superior entitlements. The spin on magnanimity that the Christian tradition includes, however, is that the great acts that are fitting for the great person consist not in demanding the honours and privileges that are due one, but in acts of self-giving with respect to one’s entitlements.

One might wonder: why would both self-accepting humility and magnanimous humility come to be called ‘humility’? Here is my suggestion: ‘humility’ besides connoting a virtue, also names a state of being brought low (e.g. to be humbled). Both self-accepting humility and magnanimous humility thus involve similarities in their behavioural manifestations: a certain meekness and gentleness that amounts to taking a ‘lower place’ than one’s presumed or actual status. However, as I have been stressing, there is a significant normative difference in the structure of the respective virtues: in displaying self-accepting humility one is brought low as a consequence of recognising the place due to one’s position, while in displaying magnanimous humility one chooses to be brought low *despite* one’s position. Thus, although the term ‘humility’ is ambiguous between these two virtues, it is not as though the two virtues are completely unrelated as in the way that ‘bank’ is ambiguous between a financial institution and the land around rivers. Rather, the two forms of the virtue are thematically linked in that they are related to being brought low.

Magnanimous humility seems precisely the sort of humility displayed by Stevenson in his interaction with Black. It was well within his right to remain aloof and shun Black, indeed it seems that he was also entitled to harshly rebuke Black over the course of their conversations. He possessed these entitlements because he was in certain aspects superior to Black — he possesses more knowledge and did not hold morally heinous views. This meant that his decision to refrain from exercising the entitlements that were grounded in his superior status was an act of self-giving that involved ‘lowering’ himself to befriend Black and to gently ask questions of him.⁸ It is this sort of ‘lowering’ that makes Stevenson distinctively humble as opposed to merely compassionate or loving.

We will return to examining magnanimous humility in contexts of disagreement later (§2). I want to first contrast magnanimous humility with alternative formulations in the contemporary literature. These formulations aim to capture something other than self-accepting humility and so contrasting my formulation with them will be instructive.

⁸ If Stevenson was confident or cocky about his ability to wear down Black, does that somehow undermine the claim that he is humble? I don’t think so. In general, confidence that one can successfully pursue one’s goals is not incompatible with either self-accepting humility (Socrates, for example, was quite confident in his ability to interrogate the pretenders of wisdom in Athens) or magnanimous humility (Christ was certainly confident in his ability to carry out the plan of divine salvation). Furthermore, the charge of cockiness is unfair if we take Saslow’s account of the events at face value — Stevenson claimed to have modest goals for the dinners, in his words “The goal was really just to make Jews more human for him” (Saslow, 2019). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.

First, consider Roberts and Woods' (2003; 2007) first formulation of humility as the virtue that is opposed to vanity.⁹ On their view, vanity is an excessive concern to be well regarded by other people. Humility, then is "a striking or unusual un-concern for social importance and thus a kind of emotional insensitivity to the issues of status." (2007: 239) Indeed, they describe Christ's humility as one where the concern for status is "swamped" by an overriding concern for the good of humanity. Does this fully describe what is virtuous in cases of magnanimous humility? I do not think so. As Murphy (2021) notes, Roberts and Woods are not clear in their discussion whether Christ had genuine normative reason to care about his status (that he decided to forsake) or whether status considerations were normatively irrelevant here and Christ was simply refraining from taking into account considerations that were anyway irrelevant. According to Murphy, we fail to understand the God's holiness and the wonder of the incarnation if we claim that Christ's status was normatively irrelevant. In my terms, it is unclear from this formulation whether or not the virtue depends on there being genuine entitlements.¹⁰ Furthermore, this formulation fails to capture the fact that there is something particularly virtuous about Stevenson's behaviour as opposed to Black. While it is true that Stevenson might have a low concern for his social importance, surely the same could be said for Black in his willingness to publicly admit his mistakes. The crucial difference is that Black was not entitled to receive a certain sort of social or moral regard from Stevenson due to his morally heinous views, while Stevenson was entitled to remain aloof for his own emotional self-protection. The virtue involves not merely a lack of concern, but a willingness to give up one's rightful entitlement.

Roberts and Woods' second formulation of humility is as the virtue that is opposed to arrogance. On this formulation, "humility is a disposition not to make unwarranted intellectual entitlement claims on the basis of one's (supposed) superiority or excellence" (2007: 250). This still misses the mark, however, as magnanimous humility is not merely about a disposition to accuracy in inferring one's entitlements. We can imagine, for example, a large number of students at New College who were disposed to accurately discern that they were entitled to reject Black's claims about e.g. white genocide in conversation and were circumspect about other beliefs about which they had less evidential warrant. These students did not engage Black and would have shut him down early in their conversation if they did engage him. There was something particularly virtuous about Stevenson and the others who refrained from exercising even the entitlements that were warranted for them. Magnanimous IH thus concerns this virtuous refusal to make entitlement claims that one recognises as warranted.

Next, consider Priest's (2017) interpersonal theory of intellectual humility. Priest rightly observes that the intellectually humble will refuse special intellectual treatment even when such treatment is deserved and takes seriously the intellectual contributions of inferiors. Thus far, this accords with my understanding of magnanimous humility. My dispute with Priest, however, concerns her formulation of the virtue. Priest describes the intellectually humble as one who lacks a sense of entitlement because they have the right kind of respect for the intellectual agency of others.¹¹ However, the way that Stevenson interacted with Black goes beyond what respect demands. It would be consistent with respecting Black that Stevenson refrains from bullying or ostracism. However, respect does not demand friendliness or gentle engagement. To make this point more salient, consider Daryl Davis, a black blues musician, who went around the United States seeking to engage with members of the Ku Klux Klan. While doing so, he had long conversations and

⁹ See also (Callahan, 2021, 2024) for a view that pits humility against what she calls vicious pride.

¹⁰ I have discussed the relationship between my account and Murphy's formulation of divine humility in fn 7.

¹¹ See also (Pritchard, 2020) for a formulation of intellectual humility in terms of respect for others.

formed many friendships, eventually convincing more than 200 members of the KKK to leave the organisation (Davis, 2023). There is something especially virtuous about Davis' behaviour that went far beyond being willing to accord respect for the agency of his interlocutors. To equate this merely to showing respect would be to claim that the many other black persons who refused to engage with members of the KKK did not respect their agency — an utterly implausible claim. It is not inconsistent with epistemic respect to put down and reject an interlocutor's assertions in a conversation if one knows that they are false and demeaning. Rather the virtue of Stevenson and Davis involved a kind of restraint and patience that goes beyond respect.

Finally, consider Byerly's (2014) formulation of humility as a disposition "to prefer the promotion of what is good for others rather than what is good for oneself in cases where one cannot equally promote each of these goods".¹² Byerly also connects this formulation with Christ's example of humility: Christ's incarnation and crucifixion are understood as his forsaking his own good for the good of humanity. Again, my quarrel is in the formulation of this virtue. To prefer to promote the good of another over and above one's own exemplifies magnanimous humility only if one assumes that we have a prerogative to prioritise promotion of our own goods. In situations where that entitlement is suspended (perhaps we are in another's debt or are entrusted with the care of another) our acting to promote that person's good before ours fails to be an instance of magnanimous humility because we were not entitled to prefer promoting our own good in the first place.

1.2 | Magnanimous intellectual humility

Magnanimous humility, then, cannot be properly understood without reference to legitimate entitlements. It thus consists in a disposition to appropriately refrain from exercising one's legitimate authority or entitlement because one is appropriately motivated to pursue some broadly moral good. In the rest of this paper, I focus on magnanimous intellectual humility (Henceforth, Magnanimous IH):

Magnanimous IH: Magnanimous intellectual humility consists in a disposition to appropriately refrain from exercising the legitimate epistemic entitlements that one has due to the superior epistemic credentials one possesses because one is appropriately motivated to pursue epistemic goods.¹³

I will later discuss the sort of epistemic entitlements I have in mind (§2). Let me first clarify some of the components of this formulation.

First, the epistemic goods that one pursues in manifesting the virtue should not be conceived individualistically. While there is much that one can learn personally from exercising magnanimous IH, the virtue also aims to promote more communal epistemic goods such as mutual understanding.

¹² See also (Wilson, 2016) for a proposal that understands modesty as a form of kindness.

¹³ I've formulated magnanimous humility in a way to make room for divine humility, but does God display magnanimous *intellectual* humility? I think so. Many have thought that divine revelation in human language already amounts to a humble accommodation of humanity's cognitive limitations (See e.g. (van Inwagen, 2010)). Furthermore, part of the function of the incarnation was epistemic, in the words of St. John "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side [i.e. the Son], he has made him known." (John 1:18)

Secondly, as I noted earlier, to refrain from exercising one's legitimate entitlements implies that one has the ability to exercise that entitlement. There will be situations where one is unable to exercise one's legitimate entitlements. For example if one has the authority to issue an order, but is somehow illocutionarily disabled so that one cannot receive the uptake to perform that speech act (e.g. Tanesini, 2019). In such a situation, one might still possess the virtue of magnanimous IH insofar as one is disposed to appropriately refrain from exercising one's entitlements, yet one is unfortunately prevented by context from exercising the virtue.

Finally, note that if it is appropriate for you to refrain from exercising an epistemic entitlement, it must be the case that not only is it epistemically permissible for you to φ but it must also be epistemically permissible for you not to φ . That it is epistemically permissible to φ is compatible with it being the case that you are epistemically required to φ . However, it seems odd to think that you are virtuous in refraining from doing what you are epistemically required to do! Thus, appropriate refraining from an epistemic entitlement to φ presupposes that it is epistemically permissible for you to φ and to not φ .

To claim that we are permitted both to take and refrain from taking some option and that it is better to refrain seems to commit us to the possibility of some kind of supererogation. The possibility of supererogation is undoubtedly controversial, and it is out of the scope of this paper to defend it.¹⁴ Nonetheless, let me note that the claims I am relying on in this paper are fairly weak. Given that the focus of this paper is on *intellectual* humility, I am simply relying on the possibility of epistemic entitlements and not moral ones. While it is controversial for certain domains e.g. belief whether it can be the case that it is epistemically permissible to φ and to not φ ,¹⁵ the primary epistemic entitlement that I will use to illustrate magnanimous IH is our epistemic entitlement to make assertions. There, it is relatively uncontroversial that epistemic norms will either forbid or permit assertions and not require them.

Now, I also want to claim that it is epistemically better that we refrain from exercising certain entitlements in the sense that we can promote greater epistemic goods by refraining. There are two ways to make sense of this claim. On a stronger reading, I am still relying on a form of epistemic supererogation — one has a genuine epistemic option to assert and to not assert although epistemic reasons count in favour of refraining from exercising that entitlement. The existence of epistemic supererogation is also controversial, however, much of that debate has again focused on whether one can display epistemic supererogation with respect to our beliefs instead of assertion.¹⁶

My preferred way of construing these claims is indeed in terms of epistemic supererogation. However, there is another way of reading my formulation that does not commit me to the possibility of supererogation. We do so by noting that it is commonplace to accept that there is a notion of all-things-considered permission and requirement that comes apart from epistemic permission.¹⁷ For example, you might have the epistemic authority to make some assertion, but a terrorist threatens to blow up the room if you speak. Here you are epistemically permitted to speak but are not all-things-considered permitted to do so.¹⁸ This distinction implies that situations will

¹⁴ See (Archer, 2018; Heyd, 2024) for overviews of the literature.

¹⁵ This is related to the debate between permissivism and uniqueness. See (Kopec & Titelbaum, 2016) for an overview.

¹⁶ See (Hedberg, 2014; Li, 2018) for a defence of supererogation with respect to belief and (Siscoe, 2021) for criticism.

¹⁷ I am assuming a picture of normativity here where there are a number of distinct normative domains (e.g. the moral, the epistemic, the aesthetic, the prudential etc.) that can be the source of reasons, obligations and permissions. The considerations from each domain then interact with each other (not simply in an aggregative manner) to determine our all-things-considered obligations and permissions. For discussion of this see (Broome, 2013).

¹⁸ Note that this is not a manifestation of magnanimous IH, after all your choice to refrain is unrelated to epistemic goods.

arise where, due to the stakes involved, you are required to exercise magnanimous IH. Perhaps, if you are certain that your willingness to humbly engage with a Neo-Nazi will soften his stance to an extent that prevents him from carrying out a terrorist attack, you are required to exercise magnanimous IH. There is thus a way to formulate my claims without the notion of supererogation — we may simply insist that whenever magnanimous IH bids us to refrain from assertion, it is epistemically permissible for us to refrain and to assert, but that it is all-things-considered required for us to assert due to the epistemic goods that we would obtain by refraining.¹⁹

In what follows, I will talk of situations where we possess an epistemic entitlement to φ but where refraining is epistemically better. Readers are invited to gloss these claims in ways that are compatible with their own view on supererogation.²⁰

2 | MAGNANIMOUS INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY, DISAGREEMENT AND ASSERTION

The exercise of magnanimous IH involves a willingness to ‘stoop’ epistemically in engagement with one’s epistemic inferiors in pursuit of some epistemic goods that we can both share — this ‘stooping’ consists in refraining from exercising the legitimate epistemic entitlements that are based on one’s superior epistemic credentials. In this section, I hope to illustrate what this looks like in contexts of disagreement. However, what are epistemic entitlements? Epistemic entitlements are the entitlements that we possess to perform certain actions or speech acts because we possess the requisite credentials. For example, we may have epistemic entitlements to cease inquiry (Willard-Kyle, 2023; Woodard, *forthcoming*) or to believe some proposition²¹ or perhaps even to speak authoritatively on some matter (Zagzebski, 2012). Any of these may fall into the scope of Magnanimous IH. However, for the purposes of providing a clear illustration of how the virtue functions, I will focus on the kinds of entitlements that we possess in assertion. I do so because, despite the simplicity of assertion, it is a substantive speech act in our conversational relationships with others and can make a palpable difference to the kinds of joint inquiries or deliberations that we may conduct with them. To be clear, then, I am not suggesting that magnanimous IH is just about being silent occasionally but is rather a gracious disposition to epistemically ‘stoop’ to the level of our conversational partners by refraining from exercising certain epistemic entitlements (including but not limited to assertion) in order to enrich our epistemic engagement with them.²² In this section, I will illustrate this virtue by showing that situations of deep disagreement wherein we are the knowing party are best described as situations where we are epistemically entitled to assert but where magnanimous IH may bid us refrain from asserting.

The nature of assertion is complicated and is the subject of much philosophical discussion. I just want to draw out two features of assertion that will be relevant. First, assertion often functions

¹⁹ Can we make a similar move to formulate the non-intellectual variant of magnanimous humility without relying on supererogation? Yes. We simply need to read the entitlement that one refrains from exercising as coming apart from all-things-considered permission and requirement. Thus, perhaps I have an entitlement to forgive or to refrain from forgiving my enemy in the sense that I do not owe it to them to forgive them, or they could not fittingly resent me if I refrained from forgiving them. However, the goods I would promote in forgiving them makes it such that I am all-things-considered required to forgive.

²⁰ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify the relationship between my formulation of magnanimous IH to supererogation here, and thanks to John Hawthorne for discussion on this point.

²¹ As I have noted earlier, whether we have such entitlements with respect to beliefs is controversial.

²² I’d like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.

as a proposal to add a proposition to the common ground of a conversation (Stalnaker, 1999). Such proposals can be challenged and are often challenged by questioning whether the speaker has the epistemic credentials with respect to the asserted proposition. Thus, secondly, it has been commonly accepted that assertion is governed by a norm that permits assertion only when you meet some epistemic standard.²³

What is the relevant epistemic standard? The most discussed standard is knowledge.²⁴ There are two sides of what has been called the knowledge norm of assertion, one where knowledge states a necessary condition for proper assertion, and another where knowledge states a sufficient condition. Given that I am interested in situations where one properly possesses an entitlement, we will focus on the sufficiency leg of the knowledge norm (Anderson, 2020; DeRose, 2002; Hawthorne, 2004; Simion, 2016). I formulate it in the language of entitlement here:

KNA-S: One is epistemically entitled to assert that *p* if one knows that *p*

Much ink has been spilled debating the knowledge norm and it is out of the scope of this paper to engage with all the relevant objections. Indeed, one could formulate the kind of entitlement that magnanimous IH is concerned with in terms of one's favoured norm of assertion.²⁵ Thus, as I will later note, it would not be difficult to adapt my account to make structurally similar points about how magnanimous IH operates if one thinks that the norm of assertion is other than knowledge.

Nonetheless, I want to illustrate magnanimous humility by discussing the knowledge norm for two reasons. First, I am simply persuaded that KNA-S is correct. Second, Carter and Gordon (2016) have recently suggested that the fact that intellectual humility calls for one to refrain from making assertions in situations of disagreement is evidence against the knowledge norm of assertion. It would thus be instructive to frame my discussion in engagement with them.

KNA-S states the conditions under which one has sufficient epistemic credentials to be entitled to make an assertion. This does not mean, however, that one ought all-things-considered make the relevant assertion or even that it is permissible all-things-considered to assert. Prudential reasons (e.g. the information is irrelevant) or moral reasons (e.g. you are questioned by an assassin) might make it such that you ought all-things-considered to withhold from asserting. KNA-S is simply a claim about what you are epistemically entitled to assert. In being entitled you have a certain freedom to perform some speech act — specifically the freedom from criticism that you do not have the right epistemic credentials to make the assertion. Indeed, cases involving Magnanimous

²³ (Mandelkern & Dorst, 2022) deny this. It is out of this paper's scope to engage with them. Nonetheless, they grant that there can be contexts in which one can make a conversational move to increase the epistemic standard for proper assertion. One who meets that standard in such a context then acquires an entitlement to assert, and magnanimous IH may well bid one refrain from exercising that entitlement. If the standards are often low, that may just mean that there are more opportunities to exercise magnanimous IH.

²⁴ Two lines of evidence are usually cited in defense of the knowledge norms. The first line consists in the infelicity of Moorean sentences such as "It is raining, but I don't know that it is raining". Asserting such a sentence seems necessarily infelicitous even though it states a possible state of affairs and some philosophers have drawn the conclusion that when asserting that *p* you represent yourself as knowing *p* (Moore 1962). The second line of evidence consists in certain conversational patterns which suggest that the standard of knowledge governs our practices of assertion. For example, a common way to challenge another's assertion is to ask "How do you know?" or "Do you know that?" — both of these appear to be ways of questioning the authority of the speaker to make the relevant assertion (Unger, 1975; Williamson, 2000). For an overview of the literature on the knowledge norms see (Benton, 2014).

²⁵ Alternatives include: truth (Weiner, 2005), reasonable belief (Lackey, 2007), certainty (Beddor, 2020), even infinitely iterated knowledge (Goldstein, 2024).

IH, I suggest, are ones where you are epistemically entitled to assert even if the balance of *epistemic* considerations implies that the best thing to do is to refrain from asserting.

Here is a situation where one is clearly entitled to make an assertion but where, for the sake of pursuing further epistemic goods, one has good reason to refrain. We should be familiar with scenarios when teaching undergraduates where they try to formulate some insight, but in expressing themselves they inadvertently misuse philosophical terms or misinterpret some point. The instructor, possessing the requisite epistemic authority, is entitled to correct the student immediately. It may be, however, that the student will struggle to articulate their genuine insight without relying on some false premises. If we understand assertions as proposals to add to the common ground, it would be hard for the student to articulate his point once the instructor has added the negation of the student's premise into the common ground. Magnanimous IH would bid the instructor refrain from asserting what she is clearly entitled to assert. Allowing the student to articulate his thoughts may help him get clearer on his own thinking, and perhaps even allow him to see where he has gone wrong for himself. On the part of the instructor, it is also not infrequent (speaking from personal experience) that there is much to learn from the garbled thoughts of students — they contain genuine insights that we are prone to overlook.

Three features of this sort of case are interesting. First, we would mischaracterise the important asymmetry between student and instructor if we claim that the instructor would make an epistemically improper assertion if she refutes her student. Rather, the skilful humility she displays is best described as the instructor's foregoing of her entitlement to assert in pursuit of epistemic goods that both may enjoy. Second, notice that, unlike in standard counterexamples to KNA-S (e.g. Lackey, 2011; Brown, 2010), increasing the epistemic credentials of the speaker will not alter her reason to refrain from making the assertion. The epistemic credentials required for assertion are irrelevant to the considerations that bear on refraining. This second point also implies that even if one thinks the norm of assertion is other than knowledge, we need not alter the structure of magnanimous IH's formulation.

Finally, notice that the foregoing of assertion is done in response to *epistemic* reasons, but, while these epistemic reasons count in favour of refraining from assertion, they do not make the assertion epistemically improper. If the instructor did make the relevant assertion, it would be a mistake to infer that she is not epistemically entitled to assert.²⁶ We need to make a distinction between what is epistemically permissible for a speaker and what is epistemically best for them to do. It would be best for the instructor to exercise magnanimous IH and refrain, yet she remains epistemically entitled to assert.

I suggest that a similar dynamic holds in contexts of deep disagreement. Carter and Gordon (2016) claim that in situations of deep disagreement, IH bids us to refrain from asserting propositions that we know. Deep disagreements, according to Carter and Gordon, are disagreements that are rationally irresolvable; they are “dialectical positions from which there simply is no appropriately neutral common ground from which either side could rationally persuade the other.” (494) These are disagreements where the participants do not merely disagree about first-order facts but also about higher-order claims such as what constitutes evidence that bear on the matter at hand or what the sources of epistemic authority are. Such disagreements are prominent across the religious, political, and social divides that mark modern society. Note that deep disagreements are not

²⁶ Simion (2016) notes that there is a distinction between the epistemic norms governing assertion and other norms with epistemic content (e.g. institutional or prudential norms with epistemic content). My discussion goes further and suggests that there are *epistemic* considerations to refrain from assertion that are distinct from the norm of epistemically proper assertion.

peer disagreements — in the scenarios I am interested in, one party is stipulated to be knowing and epistemically superior.

Carter and Gordon suggest that in such situations, if we wish to find common ground and promote mutual understanding, we need to refrain from making known assertions. The disagreement between Black and Stevenson might be like this. Part of Black's white nationalist ideology might include the assumption that there is a widespread Jewish conspiracy to subjugate whites, and this determines which news sources he considers reliable. Stevenson knows that such claims are implausible and stem from racist hatred, and so is entitled to assert that no such conspiracy exists. To do so, however, might be to try to add to the common ground a proposition that makes it hard for Black to elaborate on his perspective. At the very least, by refusing to allow Black to add to the common ground his claims about Jewish conspiracy, Stevenson may prevent Black from continuing to say more about his point of view.²⁷

Thus far, I agree with Carter and Gordon as to what IH would require here. In fact, they come close to my view in claiming that what is required here is for one to “set aside what one regards as one's epistemic entitlement to assert what one knows in the attempt to find common ground” (2016: 499). My quarrel with them is that they infer from IH requiring one to set aside one's epistemic entitlement to the claim that one never had such an epistemic entitlement to begin with. Again, however, this would mischaracterise the normative asymmetry between Black and Stevenson. Stevenson is clearly entitled to reject Black's false and offensive claims and exercises a heroic form of magnanimous IH in refraining from doing so. If Black refrains from asserting something he does *not* know, he may be admirable but displays a different kind of IH. In cases of deep disagreement, the knowing party is epistemically entitled to make certain assertions, even though it might be epistemically best for them to refrain. Contra Carter and Gordon, then, understanding such situations as calling for magnanimous IH confirms rather than challenges KNA-S.

3 | MAGNANIMOUS INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND OPPRESSION

A number of these deep disagreements take place not just across political and religious lines, but more troublingly across relations of domination and oppression. I noted earlier the example of

²⁷ A worry: Does magnanimous IH involve deception? By refraining from making a certain assertion, one may be falsely implying that one lacks knowledge or giving the false impression that one is keeping an open mind while remaining dogmatic about some matter. Let me provide four brief replies.

First, I agree that blatant acts of deception should not count as instances of magnanimous IH (e.g. if I refrain from reporting on my infidelity to save my marriage). This suggests that we need to understand what it means to *appropriately* refrain from exercising one's epistemic entitlements as including our doing so in a way that respects the epistemic agency of others. Second, unlike assertion, the norms governing implicature and our responsibility for others believing what is implicit in our speech is not straightforward (See Fricker, 2012; Hawthorne, 2012). Perhaps one is not always responsible for one's audience believing what is merely implied in our speech and so is consistent with respecting their agency that our speech has this consequence. Third, if one is still worried about misleading implicatures, we can note that implicatures are cancellable. Stevenson may well say to Black, “Look I personally disagree with what you just said but let me grant that you are right and let's see where that goes”. If both Stevenson and Black know prior to the conversation where they stand with respect to these issues, it is not obvious that Stevenson would induce any false beliefs in exercising magnanimous IH with Black. Finally, it strikes me that Stevenson can continue to engage in genuine inquiry with Black even if he remains dogmatic about his belief. There are tricky questions here about whether one can inquire into *p* while believing *p* (e.g. Friedman, 2017), but we may describe Stevenson as genuinely inquiring into some broader question (why Stevenson thinks the way he does, how white nationalists make sense of standard objections etc.). Thanks to Simon Goldstein for raising this worry, and John Hawthorne for discussion.

Daryl Davis who engaged with members of the KKK. Part of Davis's motivation was epistemic, in his words, "I just wanted to have a conversation and ask, 'How can you hate me when you don't even know me?'" (Davis, 2023). Perhaps more so than Stevenson, Davis displayed a courageous form of magnanimous IH in speaking not only to those who were intellectually mistaken but who had participated in practices that contributed to the oppression of people like himself. What role might magnanimous IH play in contexts of oppression?

Some have doubted the usefulness of humility in oppressed and marginalised contexts. Historically, humility had certainly been weaponised to perpetuate oppression, as Fredrick Douglass noted:

"I have met, at the south, many good, religious colored people who were under the delusion that God required them to submit to slavery and to wear their chains with meekness and humility. I could entertain no such nonsense as this ..." (Douglass, 1982)

Such criticism of humility is usually targeted at self-accepting forms of humility. If humility consists in focusing on one's limitations and accepting one's lower place in the world, then it seems particularly cruel to ask marginalised and oppressed persons to be humble (See e.g. Dillon, 2021; Bloomfield, 2021). What they need, after all, is perhaps more arrogance; they need to regain a sense of self-respect and their superiority to better resist their oppressors. Proponents of self-accepting humility are not without response here (e.g. Whitcomb et al. 2021), but I want to take the opportunity to examine the role of magnanimous IH in contexts of oppression. Drawing on José Medina's (2012) influential epistemology of resistance, I suggest that there is much reason to cultivate magnanimous IH in such contexts.

3.1 | Magnanimous intellectual humility and the epistemology of resistance

It would be helpful to begin with summarising Medina's conception of the epistemological situation of the oppressed. Drawing from other race and feminist theorists, Medina points out that there is a deep relationship between social and epistemic injustice. The epistemic frameworks that divide society mutually reinforce existing relations of domination and oppression. The differently situated positions of the dominant and the oppressed, however, facilitate different epistemic features. Dominantly situated persons are poised to develop a host of epistemic vices — they are incentivised to develop active ignorance about the conditions that sustain their privilege and the key vice of meta-blindness. Oppressed persons, on the other hand, are poised to develop epistemic virtues — they are incentivised to learn about their oppressors to navigate around them and are poised to develop the key virtue of meta-lucidity.

What are meta-lucidity and meta-blindness? Meta-lucidity consists in the realisation that there is more to be seen than what is revealed by our current epistemic practices. In particular, there is more to know than what the cognitive structures that ground our relations of oppression reveal to us. Meta-blindness is the exact opposite — the inability to recognise that there is more to be seen than what one sees. According to Medina, one develops meta-lucidity by exposing oneself to sources of epistemic friction — alternative viewpoints that serve as a foil to challenge and ground our assumptions about how we see things. Developing meta-lucidity will allow us to develop new and better epistemic resources by bringing different perspectives into productive conversation.

Why are the oppressed poised to develop meta-lucidity? They are compelled to internalise the social gaze of the dominant group and so are forced to develop what Du Bois (1903) calls double consciousness. This involves being keenly aware that there are two ways of viewing reality and where they must see themselves through the distorted gaze of the dominant class. Du Bois claims that the goal of the struggle is not to eliminate this duality in one's vision but to live with it and to learn from each of the component parts. In this way, Medina suggests that the oppressed can develop a sort of virtuous double consciousness with its internal epistemic friction to become meta-lucid. They will then be enabled to discern the structure of oppression and develop new epistemic resources to tackle these problems.

I suggest that developing the virtue of magnanimous IH is especially helpful for developing the sorts of epistemic resources we need to combat oppression. By cultivating magnanimous IH, the oppressed are (1) better poised to develop meta-lucidity for themselves and (2) better able to enable meta-lucidity more broadly for the privileged.

First, cultivating magnanimous IH as opposed to self-accepting IH is especially helpful in allowing the oppressed to develop meta-lucidity. Self-accepting IH is certainly not irrelevant. After all meta-lucidity is partly about recognising that there are blind spots in our current epistemic resources. The danger, however, is that encouraging the development of self-accepting IH might end up crushing the psyche of the oppressed. There is a present danger of one perspective overpowering the other, and in contexts of domination it may turn out that privileged perspectives will denigrate and diminish the valuable marginalised perspectives of the oppressed.

What is required is a way for the oppressed to seriously engage with dominant perspectives without forsaking their confidence. For example, it is important that Davis, in engaging with the KKK, not lose confidence in his fundamental dignity or doubt his ability to discern basic moral truths. It seems magnanimous IH provides us precisely with the stance that the oppressed need. Magnanimous IH presumes a sense of confidence in one's authority and entitlement but, motivated by a desire for epistemic goods, is willing to bracket one's entitlements to seek to understand another perspective. Especially in contexts of oppression, then, magnanimous IH would equip the oppressed to confidently engage with the perspective of their oppressors.

Secondly, magnanimous humility on the part of the oppressed is key to developing meta-lucidity for the oppressors. One might wonder: why care about whether oppressors develop meta-lucidity? In conditions of oppression, political and epistemic structures mutually reinforce one another. This means that while political structural change is important, so is the task of changing hearts and minds. In modern democracies, there is only so much that seizing social power and pushing through one's favoured legislation can do to improve social conditions.

While the social location of the privileged disposes them to develop meta-blindness, this development is not determined. In the American context, Medina discusses the possibility of the development of a white double consciousness — a way for privileged whites to imbibe epistemic friction into their own perspectives to develop meta-lucidity. As he notes, however, the privileged class cannot develop such a perspective in isolation, they require “actual bodily encounters with racial others that disrupt the normal operation of one's racialised transactional habits [to produce] a vivid racial awareness” (2012: 222). They require “lived disruptions” to their way of seeing the world.

If so, then magnanimous IH can play a key role in helping the privileged develop meta-lucidity. By creating safer, more gentle spaces in a political landscape marked by hostility, people can come together and listen to each other's experiences. By offering the possibility of gracious engagement across lines of oppression, the privileged are encouraged to let down their guard to see things from a different point of view. The task of pluralising one's consciousness is one that “requires sustained

interactions with significantly different individuals and groups". Magnanimous IH provides the opportunity for such sustained interaction.

Magnanimous IH can thus play an important role in cultivating meta-lucidity both on the part of the oppressed and the oppressor. I concede that this is an empirical claim, but one that seems plausible. At the very least, given that Magnanimous IH is under-theorised, I hope these arguments would encourage empirical work here.

3.2 | Inclusivity and the cost of virtue

Let me now engage with a worry about magnanimous IH. It seems downright unfair to ask the oppressed to refrain from insisting on their epistemic entitlements in their exchanges with their oppressors. Furthermore, surely there will be occasions when they need to stand up more strongly for themselves and to speak their truths boldly in conversation. Recently, Callahan (2021, 2024) has suggested that our theorising about humility must be *inclusive*: it should cast it as a trait that is a virtue both in contexts of oppression and privilege. Does my account fall foul of this constraint?

Let me make two responses. First, the virtue of magnanimous IH calls on one to refrain from insisting on one's epistemic entitlements only when *appropriate*. It is perfectly consistent with magnanimous IH to be bold in asserting one's claims and exercising one's entitlements when speaking out publicly about injustice or in attempting to effect legislative change. There are many other factors in play when it comes to speaking publicly (e.g. demonstrating one's solidarity with a marginalised group) that would make refraining from your epistemic entitlements in public venues inappropriate.²⁸ As I conceive of the virtue, the site in which magnanimous IH calls for restraint unproblematically is in engaging others in personal conversation and learning from them. Even here, discernment, no less than courage, is needed to speak across the political divide. If one's opponent insists on being a bully or refuses to take one seriously in discussion, no epistemic good would be gained in speaking humbly, and there would be no need to cast pearls before swine.²⁹

Secondly, although there are genuine benefits to cultivating magnanimous IH, I do not deny that this will come at serious personal cost. However, I think we should distinguish between the question of whether a virtue remains valuable across contexts from the question of whether the virtue remains relatively costless across contexts. We more accurately articulate the normative complexities that injustice creates by recognising that virtue imposes asymmetrical burdens on differently situated groups.

To show this, it would be worth briefly discussing Callahan's own account of humility. To be clear, I do not see my account as a rival to her ingenious proposal; we are capturing different phenomena. I wish merely to show that even Callahan's account involves costs for the oppressed.

Callahan claims that humility is simply freedom from vicious pride. What is vicious pride? Callahan claims that pride is vicious when it is distracting; when our concern for our status or intellectual abilities "gets in the way of wider thought and action" (2021). What counts as vicious pride depends on the situation — in contexts where it would be conducive to our wider goals to

²⁸ I am not suggesting that Magnanimous IH has no public role. Perhaps if we were holding a public forum with our political opponents and part of the point of the forum was to see how we could collaborate, magnanimous IH might be called for. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.

²⁹ Callahan also objects to including 'appropriate' to qualify the dispositions involved in humility. I respond to this worry in fn 3.

focus on our achievements and capacities, a great amount of pride would not be vicious, whereas in contexts where that same pride would distract us from important tasks it would count as vicious. This flexibility in Callahan's account of vicious pride explains why humility would not require an oppressed person who needs to demand recognition of their capacities to diminish themselves.

Does this flexibility mean that cultivating Callahan's version of humility will be relatively costless? No. Callahan's evaluation of pride focuses on whether it interferes with more important goals. Another way to evaluate pride, however, is based on whether it is an apt or fitting response to its target. Perhaps I should be a little proud that I got my driver's license, but I should be positively beaming about finally turning in my dissertation. The problem is that, in contexts of oppression, having fitting responses may systematically lead to a frustration of one's broader goals. Thus, Srinivasan (2018) has recently pointed out that oppressed persons often face affective injustice in the domain of anger: this is a conflict between becoming fittingly angry toward injustice and being able to improve their conditions. This is because their anger tends to alienate allies, aggravate conflict or promote negative stereotypes (think of the image of the 'angry black woman' that has been used to dismiss apt anger). Fitting anger may be 'vicious' in the sense that it undermines goals that the oppressed rightly set for themselves. Pride itself seems to be related to anger: the prouder we are of something, the more disposed we are to anger when it is disregarded. Affective injustice may thus arise as well; perhaps one's fitting pride in one's cultural achievements can be distracting if the best course for a minority is to assimilate into mainstream society to rise through the ranks and make political changes. As Srinivasan points out, there is genuine normative loss for those who forsake apt emotion for their broader political goals. Similarly, cultivating IH as freedom from vicious pride may require the oppressed to forsake fitting pride to focus on important political goals.

Again, my aim is not criticism. I simply wish to note that the inclusivity desideratum ought not insist that cultivation of virtue be relatively costless in all contexts. To do so would misrepresent the normative complexities in situations of injustice. If we resist seeing inclusivity in that way, my account of magnanimous IH will not flout the inclusivity desideratum. While remaining a virtue that is important for agents in oppressed contexts, its cultivation will nonetheless involve personal cost.

Indeed, one of the unfortunate structural consequences of injustice is that those who ought to bear the greatest responsibility for remedying injustice (the privileged, the oppressors) are also those who are most epistemically ill-equipped to bear that burden.³⁰ Progress thus calls for magnanimous IH from those who are least responsible but have greater epistemic capacity. The oppressed are well within their entitlements to refuse to engage and befriend those who have benefitted from their oppression. That they have this entitlement means that even if it is best that they develop magnanimous IH, it is something that no one can *demand* that they cultivate. Importantly, then, theorising about magnanimous IH allows us to provide a proper description of the complex normative situation that injustice produces.

4 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have provided a characterisation of a neglected form of humility: magnanimous humility. Unlike the more commonly theorised self-accepting form of humility, magnanimous humility is not about limitations but instead presupposes that one possesses some entitlement

³⁰ See Medina (2012) Chapter 4.

in a context. Magnanimous intellectual humility consists in a disposition to appropriately refrain from exercising one's legitimate epistemic entitlements because one is appropriately motivated to pursue some epistemic good. I have then shown that Magnanimous IH has an important role to play in contexts of disagreement and oppression. It calls on knowing parties to refrain from pressing their epistemic entitlements to facilitate mutual understanding. And it is a virtue that oppressed persons have good reason to cultivate in order to develop meta-lucidity in themselves and others.³¹

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