What Is It to Be Intellectually Humble?
by Robert Roberts

We human beings are seekers. We seek love, wealth, security, power, happiness, and recognition. We also seek knowledge. Aristotle said, “All people by nature desire to know.” The desire to know can be very ambitious, like that of the scientists who sought to solve the structure of the DNA molecule, or rather modest. It can be enormously satisfying to know and understand things. What does it take to have intellectual success—to come to know and understand something challenging? Well, you need some raw intelligence and memory, and you need to work hard and persevere when it doesn’t come easily. You’ll be better off if you’re surrounded by learned people and have enough leisure and resources to support your inquiries.

However, you will also need to BE a certain kind of person. To achieve significant and challenging knowledge, you’ll need some virtues. One of those virtues is intellectual humility. Of course, several other virtues are needed for optimum performance as well. I mentioned persevering, and that’s of course the behavioral output of the virtue of perseverance; I mentioned working hard, and the corresponding virtue is diligence. The persevering and the diligent will have more success in knowing than the impatient and the lazy. While a love of knowledge, courage, open-mindedness, and intellectual fairness or charity are also necessary for optimal performance, the virtue I want to discuss here is intellectual humility. What is it to be intellectually humble?

The first definition of ‘humility’ in the Oxford English Dictionary is “The quality of being humble or having a lowly opinion of oneself.” Now we can’t deny that this is one meaning of the word, but it seems clear that thinking poorly of oneself is not a virtue. So some have suggested that humility is evaluating oneself correctly: if you’re the world’s worst pianist, then humility is assessing yourself as such, and if you’re the world’s greatest pianist, humility is assessing yourself as that. Although this is much closer to being the virtue than low self-esteem, correct self-assessment doesn’t seem to be humility either. Imagine two people. One is rotten at his job, and the other is spectacular at hers. And imagine that these two go around proclaiming their relative worth. The one says, “Woe is me, I am an abominable insurance salesman,” and the other says, “I am an amazingly glorious newspaper editor.” Even if both self-assessments hit the nail on the head, I don’t think either of these characters has exhibited the virtue of humility.

Accurate self-assessment is a good thing in its place, but it seems almost the opposite of virtuous to be preoccupied with assessing oneself.

The person who is constantly asking, “How am I doing?” “How do I measure up?” “How do I rank?” “What am I worth?” is too centered on his or her own value to count as humble in a virtuous sense. In the Christian tradition, Jesus of Nazareth is the model for humility, and
the crucial New Testament passages describe him as precisely not preoccupied with his status.

The apostle Paul writes to the church at Philippi encouraging them to give precedence to one another rather than to show “selfish ambition” or “vain conceit.” And he says that they should have the attitude that Jesus had, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (Philippians 2: 6-7) Jesus, whose “rank” was very high (to put it mildly), makes himself into a servant both of God and of humankind out of a passionate concern for us. Paul’s point about Jesus’ humility is graphically illustrated in the foot-washing scene in John’s Gospel. There in the upper room on the night before he was to die for them, during their dinner together Jesus began to wash his disciples’ feet as only a low kind of servant would do. This gesture was to symbolize the attitude the disciples should take toward one another and toward those for whose wellbeing they were to work in Jesus’ name, by symbolizing what Jesus was going to do for the world the next day.

As regards the nature of the humility depicted here, note that Jesus is perfectly knowledgeable about his rank, even while he treats it as nothing “to be grasped.” For he tells the disciples that though he is their Lord and Teacher, he is washing their feet to illustrate for them how their minds should be oriented to whatever status they themselves have. Humility, then, on this model, is a non-preoccupation or unconcern about one’s rank and status and worth, but not an ignorance of it.

On the faculty web page of Asif Ghazanfar, a psychologist at Princeton University, Ghazanfar comments, “For primates (including humans), the most salient features of the environment are other status-striving agents.” In other words, the monkeys, chimpanzees, baboons, gorillas and you and I tend to be quite preoccupied with our personal worth and more particularly with our rank or status. We tend to be hyper-aware of how we rank relative to the other “status-striving agents” in our environment. We want to be alpha, if not absolutely, then at least relative to somebody.

However, as I noted in the first paragraph, we humans are not one-concern creatures. We are interested in and seek many things. So our hyper-concern for rank can be mitigated or even stifled—maybe even occluded—by other concerns. Paul and Jesus, in the passages I mentioned above, are quite clear that our concern for our status can be blocked by our love for others and for God. When it is blocked in such a way as this, we have the virtue of humility.

This little article is about intellectual humility in particular, and so the concern that may dominate our preoccupation with personal status, thus yielding this particular kind of self-forgetting humility, is the one that Aristotle mentions: the desire for knowledge. Intellectual humility will be a trait of our character when we care so much about knowing, understanding, and getting to the truth of some big question that we become oblivious of how we rank, of what we are “worth” vis-à-vis the other status-striving agents in our circle. The apostle Paul says, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” (1 Corinthians 8:1) and we might add that love of knowledge can build us up in humility.

Knowledge comes into us through a variety of channels that can be blocked by our concern for status, and the successful knowledge-seeker will be one who keeps those channels open. The process requires that we be able to “listen,” either literally or
figuratively, to what others say. If what they say shows them to be superior to us in knowledge, we will be hampered in our learning if our first reaction is to try to show that we know as much as they or more. The process also requires that we be corrigible, that we be open to the possibility that our opinions are in some way misguided. If, whenever our status as knowers is threatened by the specter of correction, we feel that we must prove ourselves to have been in the right, we will have closed off an avenue of knowledge and crippled ourselves as inquirers. It can be particularly galling, if one lacks intellectual humility, to be corrected in a public forum; and the galling can obstruct the process of learning.

A lovely example of intellectual humility comes from Alice Ambrose in a report of experiences she had in the classroom of G. E. Moore, the prominent philosopher, at Cambridge University. She reports that in a series of lectures on the concept of truth Moore would sometimes criticize claims that he himself had made, say in an earlier lecture, with the same attitude one would take “to an anonymous philosopher whose mistakes called for correction.” Also, he would sometimes announce that he was going to skip to another stage in the argument because he did not know how to make the transition logically. Moore seemed to be unconcerned about protecting his status as an important professor at Cambridge because he was so deeply concerned with getting at the truth about truth. His love of knowledge swamped his concern for status, and this intellectual humility made him one of the greater philosophers of the 20th century.

Subramanyan Chandrasekhar was once asked why he could innovate in physics well beyond retirement age, while most physicists do innovative work only when young. He said, “there seems to be a certain arrogance toward nature that people develop. These people have had great insights and made profound discoveries. They imagine afterwards that the fact that they succeeded so triumphantly in one area means they have a special way of looking at science which must be right. But science doesn’t permit that. Nature has shown over and over again that the kinds of truth which underlie nature transcend the most powerful minds.” Chandrasekhar seems to be saying that early success in knowing “puffs up” the scientist, so that his enlarged ego makes it hard to see the way forward on new problems. The humble self-forgetting love of knowing can remove this impediment.