

Intellectual Humility: A Brief Introduction

By Nathan Ballantyne (February 2018)

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Contact: n.ballantyne@fordham.edu

Intellectual humility (“IH”) is a mindset that guides our intellectual conduct. It regulates our response to the evidence (arguments, reasons, and information) we have concerning our beliefs. IH appears to be valuable in many domains of life—from education to interreligious dialogue to public discourse. It promises to help us avoid headstrong decisions and erroneous opinions, and teaches us to engage more constructively with our fellow citizens. Over the last decade, psychologists, philosophers, and other researchers have begun to explore IH, using analytical and empirical tools to understand its nature and implications. IH is at once theoretically fascinating and practically weighty. Studying IH calls for collaboration among researchers from many fields of inquiry, such as psychology, epistemology, neuroscience, and educational research.

But exactly what is IH? How can we identify it and promote it? How does having it benefit us? IH researchers have explored these questions. This document describes some ideas animating the recent literature.

Imagine we are involved in a debate about some controversial issue like abortion, capital punishment, gender, or the existence of God. We and our peers disagree over which viewpoint is correct and what is relevant to making an informed judgment. Suppose someone gives us

arguments intended to undermine our favoured belief; we object to those arguments. Someone else argues that we can't properly evaluate the strength of the counterarguments because we lack relevant expertise; we assert that our experience positions us to see that the objections are misguided. In the end, we doubt the arguments offered against our belief are as powerful as our opponents insist. We decide to stick with our original view.

In our discussion and debate, and our personal study and reflection, we gain evidence and react to what we learn. We may change our minds or not. IH is a mindset that guides our reactions to our evidence. In a nutshell, IH helps us overcome merely egoistic, self-oriented responses to our evidence. This mindset encourages us to seek out and evaluate evidence in such a way that we are less influenced by our own egoistic motives and more oriented toward the truth.

Here's an example to illustrate. Two people are debating. Imagine, fantastically, that we can "see inside" their thinking and observe the actual sources of their reactions. Their speech often conceals their thoughts, but we get to peek behind the curtain. Imagine one person shares evidence from a particular expert, but the other rejects that evidence as flawed or irrelevant. We can see how that rejection is driven by the person's dislike of the expert—who is not a member of this person's in-group. This person puts forward some relevant-sounding reasons in favour of dismissing the evidence, but self-focused motives prevail.

Sometimes we are that person. When we discuss important, controversial issues with others, our responses to their arguments may be swayed by our preferences, identities, and prior opinions. For instance, how we feel about our opponents may influence how charitably we interpret their claims. How closely tied our opinions are to our identities and deepest values may limit our openness to

reconsidering our views. And how much weight we assign our prior opinions may be a matter of those opinions being ours. IH regulates our responses to our evidence so that “truth orientedness” tends to overcome our merely egoistic impulses.

IH helps us overcome our egoistic inclinations in discussion and learning, making us more likely to follow the evidence where it leads, positioning us to better understand the truth. How does IH accomplish that? Researchers present alternative models. Some models say IH moderates attitude-forming tendencies, making intellectually humble people more likely to reconsider their views and less defensive when their beliefs are challenged. Others say that IH helps people accurately evaluate their beliefs and intellectual weaknesses. A third says that IH reduces people’s concern for their own intellectual self-importance. Mixed accounts combine these features in various ways. These models of IH assume different types of mechanisms regulate egoistic responses to evidence, but each one suggests that IH helps people become better attuned to their evidence and less oriented toward their egoistic motives. IH is a “hypoegoic” concept in the sense that it suppresses self-centeredness in intellectual life.

That broad characterization of IH is consistent with leading accounts in the literature, though researchers don’t concur on how to define IH precisely. They sometimes appear to hunt closely related but different quarry. For instance, theorists treat IH variously as a personality trait, a cognitive disposition, a set of self-regulatory habits, an intellectual virtue, and an absence of intellectual vices. Sometimes IH is defined as a fully general trait, guiding people’s responses to evidence across a wide array of situations; other times, IH is defined as a way for people to manage their responses to one specific belief. One ongoing challenge for researchers is to understand the motivations for different accounts and to seek greater clarity about the nature of IH.

Researchers have also begun to ask how IH can be effectively identified. Some design and implement psychometric tools for measuring a person's level of IH, and several self- and other-reporting measures now exist. Lay judgments concerning IH, in oneself and others, are commonplace in ordinary life, and researchers have tried to understand how such judgments are formed. Questions about identifying IH are important but difficult to answer.

To begin to see why, notice that IH concerns the self. Since IH appears to be a valuable or desirable trait, self-reports may be motivated by self-enhancement. This happens when people claim to be more intellectually humble than they really are. What has been called the “modesty effect” predicts actual IH is inversely related to the self-enhancement of IH. In other words, intellectually humble people will be modest in reporting their IH, leading to lower self-ratings, whereas people who lack IH will self-enhance, inflating their self-ratings. Although researchers do not agree whether there is a modesty effect, some have created other-reporting measures to sidestep potential troubles with self-reporting. Those researchers propose that if we want to know whether certain people are intellectually humble, don't ask them—ask the people who know them. But even other-reporting measures have limitations, because observers' perceptions may be biased. Observers may, for instance, attribute higher levels of IH to people who agree with their beliefs and values than to people who do not. One task for future research is to study the specific types of situations where IH is revealed and to find ways to sharpen our perception of behaviour that indicates IH.

Even if researchers know what IH is and how to identify who has it, that doesn't necessarily mean they know how it can be promoted effectively. Researchers also seek to illuminate the factors that encourage or discourage IH. Some preliminary findings suggest IH is related to self-views,

metacognitive skills (i.e., skills for thinking about thinking), and personal security. Differences in these factors can potentially explain why one person is more intellectually humble than another. People's self-perceptions influence how they process evidence, for instance, and researchers have found self-perceived expertise leads people to dogmatically confirm their expectations when evaluating new evidence. In addition, metacognitive abilities let people reflect on issues from a "distant" perspective and distinguish between what they know and don't know. Metacognitive differences thus correspond to differences in IH. Similarly, people who feel emotionally secure and have a sense of their self-worth show less defensiveness in the face of challenges to beliefs than do people who are insecure. Research on what influences IH may lead to insights for promoting it in classrooms, workplaces, and public discourse.

The motivation to promote IH is straightforward. Researchers have often presumed that IH is better for people than contrasting traits such as intellectual arrogance and closed-mindedness. Some claim in particular that IH improves well-being, enhances tolerance for other perspectives, and promotes inquiry and learning. Such claims, if true, would show why finding out how to encourage people to grow in IH is worth the effort. But at present there are many more unsettled questions about the value of IH than well-supported answers.

Take the idea that IH increases well-being. A contrary suggestion is found in work on how people use their beliefs to defend against worldview challenges. On one hand, some people treat their beliefs as a source of comfort and self-confidence in the face of challenges; they tend to display high levels "existential security," having come to terms with weighty questions about meaning and mortality. On the other hand, intellectually humble people are more doubtful and tentative about their challenged beliefs and display lower levels of existential security. It's currently unclear,

though, what such findings tell us about the relationship between IH and well-being. Existential security is typically measured using self-reports, and so one possibility is that when people hold “defensive” beliefs, they tend to self-enhance and report more security than they actually experience. People who use their beliefs to repel worldview challenges may exaggerate their security because their beliefs suggest they ought to feel secure.

Consider also the idea that IH enhances tolerance or epistemic respect, a claim sometimes made by researchers focusing on IH and religion. Ego-defensive reactions can lead people to discount, disparage, and even destroy out-group members. Some studies suggest intellectually humble monotheists tolerate other monotheists from different traditions to a greater extent than monotheists lacking IH. But the limits of tolerance based on IH are not yet well-understood. Will intellectually humble monotheists tolerate atheists, polytheists, Wiccans, and members of suicide cults? Outside the domain of religion, we may wonder whether IH primes members of one culture to tolerate the ideas of different cultures. If IH does not lead to boundless tolerance, it may at least help people overcome what Freud called the “narcissism of small differences” while not necessarily helping them tolerate radical differences. This is a central topic for future research given that political and religious debates can spiral into ever-increasing fractiousness and polarization. If IH does in fact make people more tolerant, the value of that outcome may depend upon the range of differences they can tolerate.

Another common thought about the value of IH is that it improves inquiry and learning. Some researchers say that intellectually humble people have better access to others’ perspectives. But even if such people seek out different perspectives, they may not always get what they’re looking for. There are many obstacles to perspective-taking, including the “curse of knowledge,” the

inability to think about a topic from a less well-informed viewpoint. Even if IH cues people to try to understand others, they may not be able to truly “enter into” alternative standpoints, unless IH mitigates biases that inhibit perspective-taking. Researchers also note that IH can help people properly exercise epistemic dependence on experts. How IH secures this benefit is not obvious, though. It may encourage proper dependence because it lets people discern the difference between what they know on their own and what’s known through other people. Or proper dependence may flow from the fact that IH is a hypoegeic state: since intellectually humble people are less dismissive and hostile toward knowledgeable others, they are more inclined to trust what experts tell them. More research is needed to tease apart these possibilities.

Our understanding of IH has expanded considerably over the last decade. Much more remains to be learned about this fascinating mindset. IH researchers’ collective efforts may eventually add up to significant insights, allowing us not only to better understand human beings but possibly to foster more IH within ourselves.

Further Readings:

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