

Bridging the cultural divide in social discourse: The role of intellectual humility

Peter C. Hill, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Office of Academic Research and Grants, Biola University, sheds light on the role of intellectual humility when it comes to bridging the cultural divide in social discourse

Roe vs. Wade, Gun Rights vs. Gun Control, Red vs. Blue, Open Borders vs. Closed Borders. Here in the United States, we live in a contentious society. We are not alone. The disagreements are often vehement and carry with them significant divisive potential that is, at best, a serious social liability and, at worst, a potentially tragic factious challenge to a democratic society. News pundits provide compelling descriptions of just how polarised we are, yet they offer little on what can be done about it. So, what is at the heart of the problem and is there any hope that it can be overcome?

Identifying the problem

Social scientists have been putting their research brains together, and they keep coming back to one critical realisation: namely the problem of what seems to be irreconcilable differences between people in societies today is not social media, nor hyperbolic sound-bites of televised media masquerading as “news” (think CNBC or Fox News), nor political leaders – even those corrupt – who sometimes stoke divisive fires, nor even the contentious nature of difficult social issues themselves such as abortion rights or illegal immigration. Such factors may contribute to our inability to find common ground with others who see things differently, but they are not the underlying systemic problem. The bedrock foundation that seems to hopelessly divide families, friendships, organisations, and full societies in public discourse today is people themselves. If people are the problem, then it is crucial for science to investigate the social psychological dynamics that promote such divisiveness and to develop an understanding of how such a factional tendency can be countered.

A key ingredient according to these social science researchers is what we will call intellectual humility (IH). The John Templeton Foundation has provided generous funding to a cadre of researchers to investigate what effects, if any, might IH have on civil discourse. I have had the privilege of working on one such funded team consisting of 15 or so interdisciplinary members. In the next few issues of Open Access Government, I will describe what that team has discovered about the powerful social effects that IH has on the way that we talk with each other in such domains as religion, business and politics. For now, however, we have some preliminary work to do in understanding just what IH is and why it is such a key factor in countering even the deepest and most polarising disagreements characteristic of today’s social discourse.



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Conceptualising humility & intellectual humility

Perhaps first we should ask what humility is, for it is frequently misunderstood. In broad strokes, we can think of humility as a motivation to discount self-serving thoughts and attitudes, with a corresponding increased respect and appreciation for the value of others. As such, humble individuals lack an emotional egocentrism and maintain a low degree of self-centeredness. They are able to accurately acknowledge personal finiteness, including limitations or mistakes.

This does not mean, however, that humility is characterised by such common misperceptions as timidity, weakness, or incapability. In contrast, a properly understood humility requires a sense of security and enduring personal worth and, therefore, provides a foundation that has important psychological implications: for a proper recognition of strengths and limitations, for an ability to respond without preconceived biases to others' ideas and advice (even if contrary to one's own views), for a freedom from relying on social comparison processes motivated by a concern for social status – all of these implications require a strong, secure sense of self. It is, in the words of one eminent psychologist, a quiet virtue that lurks in the background. It does not grab headlines nor does it require centre stage.

IH is humility as it applies specifically to the realm of ideas and beliefs and is far more than just a tolerance for disagreement. Philosophers have identified it as an intellectual virtue – habits characteristic of being a good thinker and learner – along with such other habits as intellectual courage and honesty, open-mindedness and curiosity. Like humility in general, IH should be thought of as motivational drive at the heart of which is a deep, overriding, intrinsic concern for accurate knowledge – knowledge for its own sake, as an end in itself, and not as a means to some other end. For the intellectually humble person, this is the primary motivation to which all other motivations pale in comparison.

In terms of social discourse, it is a motivation to understand and not a motivation to persuade. Through such an overriding concern for knowledge, three primary components of intellectual humility can be identified: (a) a willingness to hold beliefs tentatively to the extent that one is willing to revise one's perspective given a convincing reason to do so; (b) a willingness to undertake a critical scrutiny of one's perspective, including a balanced consideration of evidence that both supports and refutes one's perspective; and (c) a willingness to acknowledge that equally sincere, capable, and knowledgeable individuals may reasonably hold differing views.

The intellectually humble person will remain curious, open-minded, and cognitively flexible because that individual acknowledges and accepts the limits of his or her knowledge and perspective of the world. Just as with humility in general, acceptance of limits can foster an attitude by which one is willing to seek new knowledge and accept feedback, including critical feedback, from others. The intellectually humble person is able to maintain his or her perspective, but is always open to revising it, while simultaneously respecting and valuing others' views, even when such views are opposed to his or her own views.

Sneak preview of intellectual humility

In four issues that follow, I will summarise research that compares the profile of those who score high on IH (and humility in general) with those who do not. I will also look at the thorny problem of how one can maintain strong beliefs, often justifiably so, yet remain intellectually humble. I will not shy away from problems encountered in studying IH including the difficult issue of how to validly measure IH. Finally, I will review research findings as they pertain to such contentious issues as politics and religion as well as the role of IH in effective leadership. Stay tuned.

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