

Practising intellectual humility without compromising strongly held convictions

In the second part of the discussion of bridging the cultural divide in social discourse, Peter C. Hill at Biola University looks at intellectual humility with consideration to one's convictions

Surely many of us have found ourselves at some point in the delicate position of discussing a contentious social issue about which we have a clear and fervently held idea of what is correct with someone who is equally fervent in holding an opposite opinion. Such disagreements can carry with them the significant divisive potential that challenges, at a micro level, peaceful coexistence among friends or family members and, at the macro level, a profound social and political polarization within a democratic society. How can such a factional tendency be countered without compromising one's strongly held-convictions?

In this [second of a five-article series in Open Access Government, on the topic of intellectual humility \(IH\)](#), I will explore what it means to be intellectually humble in the context of social discourse with a specific focus on strongly held beliefs and convictions. Forthcoming articles will apply the practice of IH in domains where sometimes beliefs are held strongly, such as politics and religion.

How can one express humility through exchanging ideas on decisions that are significant to people's lives?

To answer this question, we should first grasp what it means to be intellectually humble on an intrapersonal level. IH is oriented toward accuracy in that it is resistant to succumb to the many scientifically well-documented self-enhancing biases common to human functioning. Two examples of such self-enhancing bias are the tendency to overestimate how much others agree with us (false consensus) and the tendency to be more confident in our judgments than what is rationally merited (overconfidence). Such biases provide an ego boost but typically do so at the expense of being accurate and result in a skewed tendency to see one's own ideas as correct and the ideas of others as requiring correction. IH involves the motivation to adjust for self-serving biases in the name of an accurate view of oneself, which necessitates an awareness of the limitations of one's perspective (i.e., beliefs, convictions, values, worldview), as well as a willingness to make appropriate adjustments to these limitations.

Regarding social discourse, the IH orientation toward accuracy means that one is motivated more by the desire to understand than to persuade or convince. In so doing, the intellectually humble person will undertake critical but equal scrutiny not only of the reasons behind another person's beliefs or opinions but also one's own and then be

willing to revise what one believes should there be a convincing reason to do so. An indicator of IH is the extent to which one is teachable; that is, the motivation to understand is guided by a willingness to acknowledge not only that equally capable, knowledgeable, and sincere individuals may reasonably hold differing views from one's own but that there may be something to learn from such individuals – even if it means better understanding the reasons behind one's own set of beliefs.

An indicator of intellectual humility is the extent to which one is teachable

That said, IH does not preclude us from holding, even strongly, beliefs or opinions in social discourse. Everyone has convictions and opinions that, often with good reason, they believe to be correct. In fact, there are likely some beliefs that are justifiably non-negotiable. This is often the case with beliefs that hold moral implications. In the eBook that is part of this issue of Open Access Government, my colleagues and I provide an example of how IH proponent Jason Baehr, a philosopher at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, maintains his convictions against white supremacy yet does so with humility. It bears repeating here. In his words, this is what Baehr would say if he were to constructively engage in discussion with someone who holds a morally reprehensible position such as white supremacy:

“I disagree with you in the strongest possible terms. I am not open to being convinced by your position. However, neither am I willing to dismiss you as a person. Indeed, I suspect I have something worthwhile to learn by getting to know more about your story and how you've come to see the world as you do. If you are willing, even temporarily, to set aside the beliefs in question and talk with me about who you are and where you are coming from, I am willing to do the same with you. I am open to the possibility that through such a conversation, we might be able to identify some common ground between us.”

This example of a non-negotiable conviction tells us that IH does not require that we be open to changing our minds about everything. Yet, as noted in the above example, one may predetermine that a held belief or opinion cannot be compromised while still finding that something worthwhile can be learned by examining why another individual may hold a differing perspective. The motivation to understand need not require relinquishing one's convictions.

Intellectual humility does not stop us from changing our minds

However, IH also does not preclude us from being open to changing our minds on some things. Making this distinction may be especially relevant to issues with moral implications such as what was described in the example above. That is, while one may be resolute against belief revision on certain moral topics, it is problematic if every contentious issue is granted such moral status, thereby making it off grounds to consider counter evidence. This may be especially true when the issue involves systemic opinions such as what is often the case in politics and religion. Perhaps the ultimate IH test is the wisdom to properly discriminate between those beliefs and opinions that are justifiably non-negotiable and those that should be open to revision.

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