

Bridging the cultural divide in social discourse, Part 5: Practicing intellectual humility in the real world

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In this fifth and final article in this series, Peter C. Hill discusses bridging the cultural divide in social discourse, mainly practicing intellectual humility in the real world

People will have differing views on almost anything of interest. So, the critical question is how we view the diversity of opinions and negotiate our differences when they occur.

In the first four articles of this five-part series in Open Access Government, I have proposed a concept that has generated considerable research interest in the human sciences called intellectual humility (IH). The focus of this concluding article will be on how IH, as something good for individuals and society, can be put into practice in the real world.

A reminder of what Intellectual Humility is

Putting Intellectual Humility (IH) into practice has to be part of who one is, at least under some circumstances, so let's remind ourselves what IH is. From the preceding articles, we can say that IH involves recognizing and owning the limits of one's knowledge and awareness of one's intellectual fallibility.

This core characteristic is often demonstrated through relationships with others where their intellect is not only valued but from which something is learned that helps the individual overcome some of those limitations. In short, the intellectually humble person is teachable.

And what it is not

It is tempting to conclude that intellectual humility is a trait-like quality you either have or don't have. Indeed, there are individual differences in terms of the degree to which IH is possessed (think Mother Theresa versus Donald Trump). Still, the demands and constraints of real-world circumstances may better determine the actual employment of IH. That is, intellectual humility may be more of a state-like characteristic than a trait-like quality, and there are some conditions where the practice of IH is especially difficult.

While the focus of such difficult conditions in this series was on politics and religion, the difficulty in practicing IH can be applied to almost any intellectual endeavor (e.g., a group of scientists working to solve a problem or a corporate board on a complex decision-making issue) or on almost any topic of social interest (e.g., opinions regarding the value of AI).

Furthermore, we should not declare the focus on limitations to be a universal virtue. Research to date has almost entirely juxtaposed IH with arrogance. However, if properly understood, IH is also a moderator of servility. As pointed out in this series, one can (and sometimes should) have intellectual commitments and even convictions. While such firmly held beliefs may be a source of error or distortion, the confidence necessary in upholding such beliefs may in itself be a virtuous characteristic.

Such confidence may be especially difficult for marginalized groups, including many women. In one study of a low SES minority population, humility was interpreted as humiliation. Promoting a limitations-owning IH as a desirable characteristic for such individuals can be counter-productive if humility is understood only as not confidently holding intellectual commitments. Such individuals must be encouraged to voice their convictions more, not less. To date, however, very little empirical research has conceptualized IH in this way.

Expanding our social networks

What can be done to promote intellectual humility in an age of polarization? We should not expect a wholesale revolution, but there are a few avenues for possible consideration that may move the needle. Social psychologists have long recognized “that just as we can think ourselves into a way of acting, we can act ourselves into a way of thinking”.^(1,2) What are some behavioral options that will promote a more humble intellectual attitude?

One avenue is to promote more heterogeneous interpersonal connections creatively. One grassroots organization that is precisely doing that, especially in the area of political polarization around social issues, is Braver Angels. By inviting “blues” and “reds” to come together in communities, college campuses, and existing organizations for parliamentary-style debates moderated by a trained volunteer, individuals learn that there is a surprisingly vast space for common ground. An excerpt from a recent New York Times article says this about Braver Angels.

Braver Angels is trying to spark a social movement that will hold the country together during the dark times that are sure to come with the presidential campaigns and beyond. It’s not about trying to change deeply held beliefs or pushing partisans to meet in the “mushy middle.” Instead, the aim is to ensure disagreements are based on reality, not lazy stereotypes, that people see the humanity of those they disagree with. It’s about giving people tools to coexist and providing a space where it is safe to interact with those from the “other side.”

Organization leadership

Another avenue is for existing organizations of all types to take the lead in creating an environment that may foster intellectual humility. For example, the American Psychological Association has identified ten principles of civil behavior, that they are trying to instill in their organizational behavior not only as aspirational principles but as procedural guidelines for all forms of communication, whether in-person or virtual.

1. Think carefully before speaking.
2. Differentiate and articulate facts from opinions.
3. Focus on the common good.
4. Disagree with others respectfully.
5. Be open to others without hostility.
6. Respect diverse views and groups.
7. Offer a spirit of collegiality.
8. Offer productive and corrective feedback to those who behave in demeaning, insulting, disrespectful, and discriminatory ways.
9. Create a welcoming environment for all.
10. Focus corrective feedback on one's best and most desirable behavior.

Intellectual humility: Conclusion

In this series of five articles in Open Access Government, I have tried to stimulate a cultural conversation about the downsides of egotism and the benefits of being intellectually humble. Concern for personal advancement – sometimes at the expense of communal concern and obligation – is often a misguided indicator of success from which society and individuals often pay a price. Humility, both intellectual and otherwise, provides an alternative understanding of what makes life meaningful and rewarding.

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