Applied Research On Intellectual Humility Distinctions

Katie Peters (GA), Heather Battaly (Co-PI)

Three Distinctions:

1. What IH Consists in versus Empirical Correlates of IH
2. Intellectual Humility versus Open-mindedness
3. Disposition of IH versus Virtue of IH

1. What IH **Consists in** versus **Empirical Correlates of** IH

What does Intellectual Humility *consist in*? This is a question about how we define the *concept* and *property* of IH. In this RFP, we are defining the concept and property of IH in terms of limitations-owning (Whitcomb et al. 2017). Specifically, persons with IH have a disposition to be attentive to and own their cognitive limitations.

- We should expect IH to consist in:
    - Admitting one's own ignorance
    - Being aware of our deficits and cognitive skills
    - Admitting to ourselves or others cognitive mistakes where relevant
    - Having a non-threatening awareness of one's intellectual fallibility

What are the *empirical correlates* of IH? This is a question about what *other* properties we should expect to find travelling alongside IH. It is a question about which properties might be associated with or an indicator of the presence of IH, even though they are themselves distinct from IH.

- We should expect IH to be empirically correlated with:
    - Asking for help
    - Knowledge acquisition
    - Character correlates: Modesty, tolerance, empathy (Porter et al. 2022a), the openness to revise beliefs
    - Appreciating other's intellectual strengths and giving credit where credit is due (Porter et al. 2022b)

Note that though we are defining the property of IH *intrapersonally*—IH is an attitude toward one's *own* limitations, we should expect some of the empirical correlates of IH to be *interpersonal.* Importantly, the empirical correlates of IH can be *inter*personal even when the concept of IH is *intra*personal; i.e., IH needn't have an interpersonal concept to have interpersonal correlates.

2. <u>Intellectual Humility versus Open-mindedness</u>

- Intellectual humility and open-mindedness often travel together, but they are conceptually distinct.
    - o If we take the virtue of intellectual humility to be a disposition to appropriately own our cognitive limitations, and the virtue of open-mindedness to be a disposition to appropriately engage with relevant ideas, beliefs, and sources, we can begin to see why they may be correlated in practice even if distinct in theory.
    - o More specifically, we can take open-mindedness to be a disposition to appropriately engage with relevant ideas, beliefs, and a willingness to revise our beliefs accordingly (Baehr 2011; Battaly 2019). While revising our beliefs is crucial to OM, it is *not* a constitutive part of IH.
    - o In this way, IH is *primarily* about our attitudes towards our own cognitive limitations. OM in contrast is *primarily* about our attitudes towards engagement with relevant ideas, beliefs, and sources outside ourselves.
    - o In measurement, however, we would predict that someone who was well-practiced at recognizing their own limitations (IH) would also be well-disposed to receiving other beliefs (OM); we should expect the converse as well.
- Let's consider some examples that distinguish IH from OM.
    - o We can have cases of IH without OM. In interacting with a white supremacist, an interlocutor can exhibit IH by appropriately owning their limitations, by for instance being aware of their tendency to jump to the conclusion that the white supremacist is a monster and owning that tendency by resisting it—by recognizing that though there is clear and ample evidence that white supremacy is false there isn't evidence that white supremacists are inhuman monsters. (Being an inhuman monster is also distinct from having moral and epistemic vices.) However, it would be inappropriate for an interlocutor to be willing to revise their own belief that 'White supremacy is false' in conversation with the white supremacist.
    - o We can also have cases of OM without IH. Consider another case: philosophers are standardly trained to be open-minded and to engage with a wide source of beliefs and ideas and are willing to revise our beliefs accordingly. But we may be oblivious to many of our intellectual limitations and/or may think our intellectual abilities are greater than they are.

3. <u>Disposition of IH versus Virtue of IH</u>

Let's move on to the distinction between having the disposition of intellectual humility and having the virtue of intellectual humility. A person can have the disposition of intellectual humility, that is, they can be disposed to be attentive to and own their intellectual limitations, even when they do so in ways that are not virtuous. For instance, a person can be overly attentive to and over own their intellectual limitations. In other words, they can have the disposition of intellectual humility to excess and can go overboard (Whitcomb et al. 2020; McElroy et al. 2023).

- To illustrate, consider someone who incorrectly attributes cognitive limitations to themselves which they do not actually have. Imagine that the student who is getting the highest grades in your course wrongly thinks she isn't grasping the material, when she's actually excelling.
- Or, consider someone who gets their cognitive limitations correct, but who is overly attentive to their limitations, whose limitations constantly pop up on their radar, even when those limitations are irrelevant to the situation at hand. Imagine a student who is struggling in their accounting class and recently failed an exam. Further, imagine he is overly attentive to these struggles to understand accounting and is constantly aware of those limitations. For instance, though he excels in biology, he allows his recent failure in accounting to undermine his confidence on his biology presentation.
- Or consider someone who gets their limitations correct and who is appropriately attentive to their limitations, but who takes even minor limitations far too seriously, by for instance, drawing attention to them in conversations with interlocutors and deferring to interlocutors who have significantly less knowledge and cognitive expertise. Imagine a TA in the field of immunology who has more expertise than their undergraduate students, but who is aware of the limitations of their expertise relative to their professors. Further, imagine that in conducting discussion sections with their students, the TA constantly draws attention to the things they still need to learn about immunology in order to gain the expertise of a professional in the field. And, because the TA takes their limitations far too seriously, they end up letting students talk over them.

In all of these cases, subjects have the disposition of intellectual humility alright. But they have it to excess and they go overboard. These subjects do not have the *virtue* of intellectual humility. To be sure, they avoid intellectual arrogance which is a disposition to be insufficiently attentive to or under own one's limitations, but they go too far in the other direction by having the disposition we might call intellectual servility.

To sum up, the *disposition* of intellectual humility is a disposition to be attentive to and own one's cognitive limitations. Whereas, the *virtue* of intellectual humility requires a disposition to be *appropriately* attentive to and *appropriately* own one's cognitive limitations rather than over-own them.

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