**Humility and Political Theory (and Little Ol’ Me)**

John Seery

Pomona College

Don’t be humble; you are not that great.

--Golda Meier

A man’s got to know his limitations.

--Harry Callahan, *Magnum Force*

The new Pope is a humble man, very much like me, which probably explains why I like him so much!

--Donald Trump, Dec. 23, 2013

In the second Republican presidential debate (Sept. 16, 2015), the moderator Jake Tapper asked the candidates what each would like as his/her Secret Service codename should he/she be elected President. Donald Trump’s answer: “Humble.”

Just a week earlier, candidate Ben Carson had seized the humility highroad (low road?) from Trump by pointedly questioning Trump’s faith: “I haven’t heard it, I haven’t seen it. You know, one of my favorite, Proverbs 22:4, it says: ‘By humility and the fear of the lord, are riches and honor and life.’ And that’s a very big part of who I am. Humility, and fear of the Lord. I don’t get that impression with him [Trump]. Maybe I’m wrong.” (This humble-brag comes from a man who has a painting, prominently displayed in his home, of himself with Jesus:

)

At a CNN Town Hall forum (Feb. 3, 2016), a New Hampshire rabbi, Jonathan Spira-Savett, asked candidate Hillary Clinton, “How do you cultivate the ego necessary to be President and integrate humility as well?” Clinton admitted that she struggles to find a balance between “ambition and humility” and said that she reads a scripture passage every morning to keep herself “grounded.” The key to reconciling countervailing tendencies in her own motives, she revealed, is to practice a “discipline of gratitude” that acknowledges one’s limitations: “Be grateful for being a human being, being part of the universe. Be grateful for your limitations.”

I’ve been tussling lately with humility, professions thereof both in and out of the public sphere. I’m confused. How can such obviously (to my eye) arrogant or disingenuous or at least presumptuous public figures such as Trump and Carson (and maybe Hillary, too) claim humility?[[1]](#endnote-1) Or are they, part of themselves at least, being sincere, a rare breakthrough revelation of inward insecurities that lie just behind the façade they present for public show? Why do some of Trump’s supporters laud his evident *lack* of humility as, to their eyes, one of his *attractive* qualities?[[2]](#endnote-2) Does humility (what we arrest and call humility) belong to a vacillating psychic economy of ongoing self-reproach and symbiotic over-compensation, a kind of Lacanian feedback loop of ever-unrequited desire? I know that “humility” is an abstract, elusive, amorphous, contestable “thing”—that preliminary scholarly disclaimer goes almost without saying—but I’m still having a hard time getting my head around it. Should I think of it primarily as a concept? A norm? A trope? A signifier? A virtue? A standpoint? An invocation? An exhortation? An accusation? A performance? A mood? An affect? An affectation? An inner state? A public posture? I’m intrigued by *humility’s* connotative proximity to *irony*, especially “self-irony,” but that association now makes me rethink my erstwhile mastery of irony (just kidding about that “mastery of irony” part. But, on second thought, not entirely, that is, if you catch me on certain days or moods, feeling uncharacteristically puffed up about myself and my scholarly career, as opposed to being self-effacing, even self-loathing. For outward academic purposes such as this one, a conference presentation, one simply must comply with the prevailing protocol for overtly displaying requisite levels of intellectual humility, as a hallmark of one’s thoughtfulness, as opposed to projecting a pretentious, self-congratulatory aura, which would qualify one as a “jerk.” I know that. But now I’m not sure whether one can or should deploy irony with respect to the topic of humility, though they may be conceptual cousins.[[3]](#endnote-3) Am I writing this in the right register?).

As the preceding paragraph exhibits all too shamefully, I’m not even sure how to go about investigating humility (especially since the subject makes one liable to becoming trapped in self-referential snares of hypocrisy, which may be a reason Montaigne, Hume, and Nietzsche all approached humility by indirection, by way of essays and aphorisms. Once you start expounding about humility, it quickly becomes unclear whether you should assume a strong burden of explanation). Here, I suppose I’ll take my initial writerly cues from Christine de Pizan, who at the outset of *The Book of the City of Ladies* coyly portrays her namesake character as a hyperbolic exemplar of female and Christian humility. That experiential conceit sets in motion a possible pilgrimage for the reader, whereby Lady Allegories of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice attempt to address and counteract questions of cultural abuse and self-abuse. In *The Book of the City of Ladies* Christine (the author) attempts to transform, à la a twelve-step treatment program, self-debasement into a positive politics.

Anyway, that curious Golda Meier quote above was my immediate prompting for the reflections at hand. It appears as the epigram at the outset of Adrian Parr’s *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics* (Columbia UP, 2013)[[4]](#endnote-4). I had recently assigned Parr’s book in my Green Political Theory course. The book is a broadside critique of capitalism, naming capitalism as the root cause and not the cure for our widespread environmental devastation. The epigram seems to discount the mantle of humility (“don’t be humble”) for the sake of a more genuine, ontological humility (“you’re not that great”). Parr never explains the significance of the epigram to environmental politics, nor during my reading of the book did the connection ever become entirely clear to me. But the epigram did spur me to think about humility with respect to the other greenish books on the syllabus. I now want to say that many if not most contemporary books on ecological/environmental political theory recommend, in one way or another, that we humans adopt a thoroughgoing politics of human humility as the first step toward repairing the planet. If one could identify a general “mood” across a vast sweep of ecological literature, humility would be it.[[5]](#endnote-5) We need, the lesson seems to be, to take ourselves down a notch or two or three; need to adjust our attitudes and curb our desires; we need to overcome our collective hubris, our presumptions of species privilege within and mastery over the rest of nature; we must learn to live with looming compromises, contingencies, sacrifices, and limitations. “The practice of sustainability gives us a humbling sense of perspective,” Leslie Paul Thiele tells us in his book, *Sustainability*.[[6]](#endnote-6) The Golda Meier quote in Parr’s book could be construed as a Platonic reality-check, now invoked for ecological purposes: “Don’t SEEM humble; actually BE humble.” Humility, rather than human self-assertion or recuperated agency, seems to be the emotional trope coursing throughout most of the environmental literature, though one does find a few countervailing examples, such as George Kateb’s call for greater human stewardship over nature,[[7]](#endnote-7) or Peter Thiel’s call for a technological overcoming of human mortality altogether.[[8]](#endnote-8) But mostly the moral is Icarus-esque, namely that we’ve flown too close to the sun and better realize it soon, flying downward, or else.

The general idea of accepting human limitations next provided me with a good reason to record *Magnum Force* on the DVR and to veg out one evening watching Clint Eastwood’s typecast masculinity to the very end. The problem with that famous line “A man’s got to know his limitations” is, I realized after my humility-inflected viewing, that it doesn’t quite make sense at any time in the film. Earlier, Eastwood’s character Harry Callahan delivers the line to mock his superior, Lieutenant Neil Briggs, who is proud that he has never drawn his gun in the line of duty. At the end of the film, Briggs (now revealed as a corrupt cop, the deskbound ringleader of a vigilante San Francisco cop ring) draws his gun on Callahan (whom Briggs has despised as a reckless cop who upholds the law by skirting the law in vigilante-like ways), but Briggs doesn’t realize that Callahan has set off a ticking time bomb in Briggs’s car. Instead of shooting Callahan on the spot, Briggs is going to let the legal process condemn Callahan (for killing some other corrupt cops). After Briggs’s car explodes, Callahan delivers the line the second time. Once again it mocks Briggs in some way, but how? What limitations did Briggs fail to heed? Should Briggs have shot Callahan when he had a chance, with a gun in hand (following Callahan’s reckless but effective policing mode), or should he simply have been more aware of the dastardly possibility that Callahan being Callahan would probably have already resorted to technological enhancements, a bomb instead of a Magnum .44? Applied to Callahan rather than Briggs, the signature line seems to mean that Callahan carries a Magnum .44 because he knows his personal limitations—you need robust weaponry, not just personal strength and detective savvy, to fight the criminals in the streets. And Callahan useshis Magnum .44 because he also knows the limitations of being a completely above-board, law-abiding cop in his enforcement of the law, so sometimes you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. Both Briggs and Callahan, it turns out, believe in resorting to vigilante justice; the difference is that Briggs believes in organized vigilante-ism and Callahan insists on going solo, a lesson in heroic male autonomy rather than surreptitious fraternity. Overall, the very plot of *Magnum Force* and most every other Dirty Harry film hardly depicts or imparts any coherent lesson about accepting limitations. Time and again, Eastwood’s character proves himself to be, after initial formulaic setbacks, invincible and eventually triumphant. If anything, he emerges victorious over those who failed to accede to *his* innate superiority. *Magnum Force*, let’s just say, did not deliver the general lesson in humility I had hoped for.

Next, I turned to some academic literature for clarification, as is my wont. It turns out that some strains of analytic philosophy have “returned” recently to “the virtues” and taken up the ethics of humility as a “value-based” character trait.[[9]](#endnote-9) The literature is quite extensive.[[10]](#endnote-10) But humility, even after such scrutiny, seems to remain enigmatic, hard to pin down. Scholars point out that it is strange, even self-contradictory for someone to proclaim, ‘I’m humble!’ since humility is a virtue of disavowal (referred to as “Driver’s Paradox” in the literature, after a philosopher named Driver).[[11]](#endnote-11) Another way of putting this conundrum is to repeat what is reportedly an old joke: “My church gave me a Humble Award, but when I accepted it, they took it back.” For Plato, to know the good is to do it; but with regard to humility, to know oneself as humble is to nullify it as a virtue. The humble, in order to be humble, must apparently lack some significant measure of self-awareness about their own humility.

The church joke took me back to church. As far as sweeping assertions go, it is probably a fair one to say that most of the world’s organized religions preach and teach humility, in one variation or another. The Abrahamic religions are especially known for their assertions of humility as a virtue. Genesis 2:7 tells the story of Yahweh forming man (*adam*) out of dust from the ground (*adamah*), a lowly and grounded origin, the common earthiness of which carries over into the Latin (human/*humus*). Numbers 12:3 describes Moses as “a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” At almost every turn of the page, the Christian Bible is chock-full of humility, from the meek inheriting the earth (Matt. 5:5) to pointed reminders to emulate Jesus’s humility (Philippians 2:3-11). Some translate the very term *Islam* as “humility,” in the sense of surrendering to Allah.[[12]](#endnote-12) Repeatedly the *Qur’an* teaches humility before Allah as well as humility with respect to others.

But my quick theological survey didn’t quell my uneasiness about humility’s apparent duplicity. Isn’t such theological humility always self-sabotaging, the stance of humbleness before the Creator betraying an enormous presumptuousness, an overarching arrogance, about knowing the very ways of the Creator, even claiming to know the basic truth of creation? The narrative frame that kicks off the Abrahamic traditions, a Genesis story that entails a huge metaphysical divide between the supramundane Creator and his baseborn creatures, seems to ensure that any concerted attempt to cope with that divide will require an admixture of presumption and abasement. That Creator-Creature frame foregrounds, I now think, Nietzsche’s scathing critique of Christian humility, the astucious strategy of trying to return to the Creator, whereby *ressentiment* and redemption go hand-in-hand.

To counter such convolutions, I sought some commonsensical clarity about humility. Recently I saw an online video featuring an interview with Hanna Pitkin,[[13]](#endnote-13) in which Pitkin laments that her Wittgensteinian/ordinary language/”conceptual analysis” approach to political theory hasn’t been more widely accepted or practiced. Humility might be a good candidate, I should think, for “conceptual analysis.” How would that go? Pitkin typically starts off her scholarly method with definitions and etymologies, then draws some key distinctions, then looks at some ordinary uses and examples, and finally weighs the uses and abuses of the term against a now-informed, now-deepened understanding of the concept in question. Following Pitkin, I note that The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *humility* as “the quality of being humble or having a lowly opinion of oneself; meekness; lowliness; humbleness: the opposite of *pride* or *haughtiness*.” The *OED* traces *humble* to the Latin *humil-em*, or “low, lowly, small, slight, mean, insignificant, base, f. *humus* ground, earth.” It defines *humble* as “Having a low estimate of one’s importance, worthiness, or merits; marked by the absence of self-assertion or self-exaltation; lowly: the opposite of *proud*.” It associates *humility* with “modesty, unpretentiousness, meekness”; it defines *humble* the verb as “To lower in dignity, position, condition, or degree; to bring low, abase,” and defines “to be humbled” as being treated in a “humiliating manner” (*humility* and *humiliate* stemming from the same *humilitatus*).

I would add to the OED understanding the synonyms and near-synonyms of *self-restraint*, *forbearance*, *shyness*, *lowness*, *inferiority*, *baseness*, *ignobility*, *vulgarity*, and *demureness*. To the list of antonyms and near-antonyms I would add *vanity*, *boastfulness*, *braggadocio*, *narcissism*, *hubris*, *chutzpah*, *overconfidence*, *arrogance*, *egotism*, *conceitedness*, *overbearance*, *pomposity*, *impudence*, *self-aggrandizement*, *self-centered*, and *self-importance*. More, I would complement the theistic traditions with pagan traditions that draw on the *daimona* Aedos, who was worshipped in both ancient Greece and Rome, who represented a congeries of qualities that we would associate with humility, namely modesty, reverence, respect, shame, and shyness.[[14]](#endnote-14) Aedos was the companion of Nemesis, and together (humility and indignation) they restrained humans from doing wrong. I would also update and complement Pitkin’s conceptual analysis with considerations drawn from recent affect theory. I submit that a wide range of contemporary political theory invites us into the moods, affects, and emotions of eclipse and loss, call it humility by cognate means, to wit: resignation (Dumm[[15]](#endnote-15)); melancholy (Kristeva,[[16]](#endnote-16) and many others); depression (Cvetkovich[[17]](#endnote-17)); despair (Marasco[[18]](#endnote-18)); anger (Sparks[[19]](#endnote-19)); rage (Chakravarti[[20]](#endnote-20)); precarity (Butler[[21]](#endnote-21)); fragility (Connolly[[22]](#endnote-22)); envy and irritation (Ngai[[23]](#endnote-23)); unhappiness (Ahmed[[24]](#endnote-24)); pessimism (Dienstag[[25]](#endnote-25)); cruel optimism (Berlant[[26]](#endnote-26)); longing (Rodríguez[[27]](#endnote-27)); victimization (Anker[[28]](#endnote-28)); disaffection (Honig[[29]](#endnote-29)); fear (Robin)[[30]](#endnote-30); passions (Krause[[31]](#endnote-31)) sad passions (Deleuze[[32]](#endnote-32)); hope (Rogers[[33]](#endnote-33)); and repulsion (Tønder[[34]](#endnote-34)).

Now that I’ve assembled that reckless inventory, I’ll put on the table another equally overbroad postulation about humility in political theory today: it seems to be everywhere (not just in ecology and affect theory). It’s the prevailing mood. It runs throughout the “loss” literature (loss of God; of metaphysics; of foundations; of subjects; of sovereignty); in throwback “natural law” circles[[35]](#endnote-35); in disability studies; in neo-materialist and post-humanist works; in many race, class, gender, and sexuality studies (especially those calling to “check privilege”). Emboldened by my own across-the-board insights, I would hazard further to declare that humility should be regarded as the hub, nub, and rub of political liberalism, that is, as the principle and sentiment of self-restraint that enables the very split between public and private realms—or as Patrick Deneen puts it, “Humility is the democratic virtue par excellence.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Modern selves, acting in a plural society under the rule of law, have to compromise their deepest commitments and curb their strongest passions in order to live productively with others.[[37]](#endnote-37) “Political humility” could easily serve as a substitute phrase for “non-perfectionist liberalism.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Once I utter that incontinent idea, I now wonder two additional things: a) have any contemporary democratic political theorists worked explicitly with humility as an indispensable conundrum? and b) if so, have they solved the problem of humility’s seemingly inherent invidiousness, duplicity, and possible masochism?

I’ve found two frontal political-theoretical engagements with humility and its discontents, both excellent (putting me with my scattered thoughts to shame), namely Mark Button’s 2005 *Political Theory* article, “’A Monkish Kind of Virtue’? For and Against Humility” and Julie Cooper’s 2013 book, *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought*.[[39]](#endnote-39) Both view humility as the key to a viable modern democratic liberalism, as an essential, if largely overlooked affective/emotional complement to public reason. Both recognize humility, however, as profoundly vexed. Both try to solve the problem of humility, or at least to allay its troubles. Neither fully succeeds, in my humble opinion. That leaves us, late-modern democratic theorists, in a lurch (I should think).

Mark Button wonders, as I do, why humility has dropped out of our contemporary conversation, though he recognizes a return to virtue-theorizing.[[40]](#endnote-40) He contends that humility “may be one of the most important virtues for late-modern societies marked by ethical and cultural pluralism,”[[41]](#endnote-41) and he wants “to show why pluralistic democracy depends on the cultivation of this virtue, properly construed.”[[42]](#endnote-42) A big part of the problem, he explains, is that our understanding of humility has been shaped by religious traditions (Jewish and Christian), such that humility becomes construed as an interiorized and largely passive state of being, delivering a notion of the human self that tries to squelch pride in the face of God’s superiority. [[43]](#endnote-43) Button worries about humility “understood as a theistically grounded command.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Such an understanding renders humility vulnerable to the broadsides against humility put forward mostly famously by Montaigne, Spinoza, Hume, and Nietzsche. In short, these writers reveal humility to be false and pernicious, an underhanded disguise for pride, ambition, resentment, and power. Button, in turn, wants to re-configure humility in a “post-Nietzschean” way. His key is to reimagine humility “less as a private, self-referencing quality and more as an active civic virtue and political ethos geared toward facilitating attentiveness, listening, and mutual understanding among and between plural others.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Instead of thinking of humbling oneself passively before God, the law, or others, one could now think of humility as an active “cognitive/affective openness to others” that potentially connects democratic selves “more directly to contemporary conditions of heightened interdependency and pluralism.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Button rests his case on a kind of Nietzschean ju-jitsu against Nietzsche’s critique of humility, eking affirmation out of *ressentment*:

One question that immediately follows in this context is how we might make ourselves available for such [Nietzschean] ‘”enrichment,” making it more likely that we will attend to and receive, rather than ignore, spurn, or resent, the “soft voice of different life situations.” What I want to suggest in this setting is that despite his power challenge to the (Christian) idea of humility, Nietzsche…expresses an epistemic-ethical sensibility that helps illuminate the cognitive/affective conditions necessary for a democratic understanding of humility. I draw on Nietzschean perspectivism here because we need to distinguish humility from fallibilism on one hand, and moral skepticism on the other. Whereas the notion of fallibilism seems motivationally too weak and ethically underdetermined to do any real moral work for us—asking us to admit that we are as yet neither perfect beings nor beings who possess omniscient standards of knowledge—skepticism tends to claim too much by denying us any room for confidence in our beliefs or values. By contrast, a public ethos of humility may generate mutual attentiveness, active listening, and great possibilities for reciprocal enrichment when humility is identified not as a form of individual self-rapprochement or generalized moral/epistemological skepticism, but as a disposition—like Nietzschean perspectivism—that is ethically attuned and actively responsive to our boundedness as cultural and temporal beings. In other words, democratic humility takes the basic facts of fallibility and limitation, and turns them into an affirmative, public practice of attentiveness and generous listening, while striving to hold off a more thoroughgoing skepticism that threatens to undercut the value or political relevance of such responsiveness in the first place.[[47]](#endnote-47)

So construed, “democratic humility” could facilitate, Button proposes, a political ethos of openness, attentiveness, and agonism toward and with others, a clear homage to Bill Connolly’s deeply pluralized scheme of things. Button proffers that democratic humility might elude the vicious machinations of theistic humility (Driver’s Paradox) because one would no longer be acting “for the sake of humility” but, rather, one would be acting “*from* or *out of* an *ethos* of democratic humility.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Modesty might thus come to pervade our civic life more generally: “In place of an ontologically ‘strong,’ theistic humility that instructs us about our sinfulness, weakness, and nothingness, a more modest (and more generalizable) ethos of democratic humility would draw us to an appreciation of contingency, limitation, and partiality in identify/belief.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

While I think Button’s analysis of modern liberalism’s theoretical lacuna—its missing cognitive/affective ethos—is right on the button, I don’t think he’s yet found a solution that sufficiently repairs humility’s defects. Instead, his solutions strike me as mere sidesteps to the problems he rightly identifies. In short: he simply stipulates the benefits of our possible cultural graduation from theistic humility into an era of democratic humility without outlining how we could actually move across that watershed, from point A to point B. And he simply stipulates the benefits of moving from an interiorized notion of humility to a civic-minded, other-directed notion, again without addressing how we all would accomplish that feat. Thus he hasn’t solved the inner/outer problem of humility (Driver’s Paradox, how one can think oneself humble and be so at the same time); rather, he has simply redescribed humility as an entirely public virtue and thereby erased the problems of self-understanding. If only we were all, through and through, public-spirited Bill Connolly deep pluralists, then we would all attentively listen to and productively engage with one another, and residual resentments over, say, lack of Muslim or Christian accommodations in the public realm, would be managed and mitigated via everyone’s ethos of democratic humility. It would be as if Richard Rorty had announced that we are all Humble Liberals toward each other in the public realm, and whatever we had been, once upon a time, in our countervailing private selves no longer exists or need matter: Et voila!

Another way of putting the above criticism: I think Button’s declaration of a post-Nietzschean post-theistic epoch, of self-chastening commoners to come, is premature. My point remains within the realm of “ideal theory.” I don’t think humility can be so cleanly wrested from its (Western) theistic ideas, origins, and connotations. In the Genesis traditions, humility is an invidiously comparative term, and it moves along a vertically ranking axis, from low (*humas*) to high (the Lord). Human self-debasement presumes a frame and foil of epistemic certainty, namely (unacknowledged) knowledge of the Creator’s superior awesomeness. At first glance, Button’s democratic humility looks like a horizontalizing relationship, and a modest rather than a dogmatic one at that. But read on in his account, and you discover that acceptance of our contingency and shared limitations turns on a background creed (“the basic facts”) regarding our existential finitude. I’m not sure why we would or should accede to “finitude” and how exactly that supplants acceding to “God.” I’m thus not at all sure that Button has staved off Nietzschean resentment by re-purposing the humiliations of humility into a supposedly democratic ethos of generalizable respect.

Julie Cooper also sees a political theory of humility as the Holy Grail for modern liberalism. Her primary theoretical aim in her book is to provide “a sober appreciation of limits to human power as a necessary condition for realizing its full extent”[[50]](#endnote-50) (translation: “A man’s got to know his limitations”). Liberal institutions need to be populated by citizens who abide by an ethos of humility. She, like Button, thinks we need to find a way to move beyond (Western) religiously framed notions of human humility. Augustine’s antinomy between a City of God and a City of Man leaves, she contends, an especially burdensome legacy in that regard. We are led to believe that human pride can be checked only by or under God, and thus any divinely unsupervised secular humankind is liable to pursue unrestrained and vainglorious projects, seeking mastery and dominion over nature and each other. Trapped by Augustine’s either/or options, we don’t, as yet, have an adequate account of “secular humility” on its own non-theistic terms. Cooper sees somewhat auspicious tendencies in that direction in the writings of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Rousseau.[[51]](#endnote-51) Each is trying to imagine human sovereignty in a way that is also self-limiting; each is trying to restrain human self-empowerment even as they enable it. But none, she concedes, truly succeeds in finding a post-Augustinian conception of humility. Secular theorists, she says, need a vocabulary and conceptual framework that can orient us toward human self-governance along with human limitations without re-invoking the baggage of supernatural supervision.

Like Button, Cooper seems to believe (following the leads of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Rousseau) that a complete break from the thrall of religious notions of humility could be effected by substituting deference to “human finitude” for deference to “God.” Again, I’m not sure that new toehold would necessarily generate democratic applications, nor has she, to my mind, adequately addressed the lurking question of humility’s ever-looming bi-polarity, that it typically turns on an invidious comparative judgment, and thus entails an admixture of presumption and renunciation. Therewith, I’m not sure she acknowledges humility’s slipperiness and wiliness, those underhanded tendencies that irk its critics.

My pedantic reservations about their humility projects notwithstanding, I share Button’s and Cooper’s overall insistence on humility’s (under-theorized) importance for political theory today. After Nietzsche’s exposé of humility’s creatively dastardly ways, I should caution that a democratic theory of humility will not be easy to construct. A theorist of humility for liberal purposes ought always to remain vigilant and suspicious of a possible disjunction between public displays and private motives. Such a theorist should probably not start out on the premise that “humility” is a static concept or state of being or state of affairs but, rather, is characteristically a performative ploy, a mood, a show, and an unstable one at that, a shifting psychic economy that intermingles arrogance with self-reproach. What Kierkegaard said about irony—“whoever has it has it all day long”—probably cannot be said about humility (see Trump). At base, to me, it’s a humbling thought for our field, to think that humility perhaps ought to be the tropical centerpiece of our democratic ponderings and schemes and yet that ethico-political posture seems, on inspection, to elude our theoretical grasp.

1. David J. Bobb might not be so surprised by Trump’s and Carson’s assertions of humility. See David J. Bobb, *Humility: An Unlikely Biography of America’s Greatest Virtue* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ron Chimelis, “Donald Trump Reflects Nation’s Disdain for Humility, *MassLive*, August 13, 2015: http://www.masslive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2015/08/donald\_trump\_reflects\_nations.html [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James Spiegel does try to associate irony with humility, but he sees Christian morality as the nexus. James S. Spiegel, “The Moral Irony of Humility,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* (6:1 (2003), pp. 131-150. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lisa Gerber, “Standing Humbly before Nature,” *Ethics and the Environment* 7:1 (2002), pp. 39-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Leslie Paul Thiele, *Sustainability* (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Peter Thiel and Blake Masters, *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future* (Crown Business, 2014). Note that Thiel argues against humility (pp. 20-21) as a lesson that business entrepreneurs should heed. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Mark Button’s first footnote for a good catalogue of the “return to virtue" genre in political theory: Mark Button, “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’? For and Against Humility,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (December 2005), pp. 840-868. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. T. Ryan Byerly, “The Values and Varieties of Humility,” *Philosophia*, 42 (2014), pp. 889-910.

    G. Alex Sinha, “Modernizing the Virtue of Humility,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 90:2 (2012), pp. 259-274. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. J.L.A. Garcia calls this “The Driver Paradox,” based on Julia Driver’s notion of modesty and humility as an underestimating of one’s worth. J.L.A. Garcia, “Being Unimpressed with Ourselves: Reconceiving Humility,” *Philosophia*, 34 (2006), pp. 417-435; Julia Driver, “Modesty and Ignorance,” *Ethics* Vol. 109, Issue 4 (July 1999), pp. 827-834. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. There are many websites that associate Islam closely with the virtue of humility. Here’s one such site: http://theliteral.com/virtue-humility-islam/ [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. https://vimeo.com/97749305 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.theoi.com/Daimon/Aidos.html [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Thomas Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Holloway Sparks writes that she’s working on a book called *Enraged: Gendering the Democratic Politics of Anger* (see: <http://wgss.emory.edu/home/people/faculty/Sparks-Holloway.html>). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Sonali Chakravarti, *Sing the Rage: Listening to Anger After Mass Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Laurie Naranch has already written recently on rage: “Recognizing Rage and Legitimate Acts of Violence,” *Hannah Arendt Center Blog*, Dec. 20, 2015: http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=17136 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Sharon R. Krause, *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Melvin L. Rogers, “Between Pain and Despair: What Ta-Nehisi Coates is Missing,” *Dissent*, July 31, 2015 (“Humility, borne out of our lack of knowledge of the future, justifies hope.”): https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\_articles/between-world-me-ta-nehisi-coates-review-despair-hope [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Lars Tønder, *Tolerance: A Sensorial Orientation to Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); also see Lars Tønder, “Humility, Arrogance and the Limitations of Kantian Autonomy: A Response to Rostbøll,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 378-385. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Mary M. Keys, “Humility and Greatness of Soul,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 37, no. 4 (Fall 2008), pp. 217-222. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 192. Gordon S. Wood counsels that the study of history (perhaps American history in particular, the subject of his studies) ought to generate straightforward humility: “If the study of history teaches anything, it teaches us the limitations of life. It ought to produce prudence and humility.” Gordon S. Wood, *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Thomas Spragens, Jr. closely aligns democratic liberalism with the virtue of humility. But as Button points out, Spragens’s notion of democratic humility is divested of masochism. Thomas Spragens, Jr., *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on our Democratic Ideals* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Interesting that Michael Frazer perceives humility in Rawls’s ways: Michael L. Frazer, “The Modest Professor: Interpretive Charity and Interpretive Humility in John Rawls’s *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9 (2), 218-226. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Julie E. *Cooper, Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Dawn Herrara Helphand reminds us that Hannah Arendt praises Pop John XXIII’s humility in Men in Dark Times. See Dawn Herrara Helphand, “Pope Francis and Humility Before God,” *Hannah Arendt Center* *Blog*, Oct. 14, 2015: http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=16739 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Button, “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’? For and Against Humility,” p. 840. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., p. 841. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Sara Rushing things Confucian humility might offer a way out of the Western religious/secular juggernaut: Sara Rushing, “Comparative Humilities: Christian, Contemporary, and Confucian Conceptions of a Political Virtue,” *Polity*, 45 (2013), pp. 198-222. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., p. 844. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., p. 849. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., p. 851. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., pp. 852-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., p. 858. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., p. 861. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Cooper, *Secular Powers*, p. 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ashleen Menchaca-Bagnulo would credit Machiavelli with being an earlier pioneer in trying to break humility free from its religious origins. See Ashleen Menchaca-Bagnulo, “Humility and Humanity: Machiavelli’s Rejection and Appropriation of a Christian Ideal,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)