Humility Versus the Desire to Throw Hands Up or Slam Fists Down

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In "Humility in Community," Cris Mayo articulates why humility is important for learning about gender and recognizing transgender and nonbinary communities and gender identity diversity. As Mayo notes, humility can "help those who are not transgender to understand that gender assignment at birth is not the sum total of what could be known about their —or anyone else's — gender," thus "going beyond one's own physical and experiential knowledge."[1] Mayo also illustrates how the quest to know gender diminishes understanding of self and other as a process marked by uncertainty, instability, and possibility. Even as cis identification opens a door to recognize other genders, it simultaneously seems to bind people within a binary and singular sense of gender reality, potentially precluding people uniting in a broader fashion about being dissatisfied or merely confused about gender identity expectations. As the essay also reflects, the desire to know, name, and thereby limit the means for recognizing diverse gender identities is also powerful. Academic freedom seems to be confused with the right to express oneself regardless of the impacts and potential harms of speech, when it comes to radical feminists claiming gender knowledge as their territory.[2]

In indicating the value of humility to such conversations, Mayo highlights where it is lacking, in the face of strong desires to know and be certain. This desire to (demonstrably) know (the other) is the flipside of strategic ignorance.[3] Both desires, to show knowledge and to feign ignorance, reflect a more general wish to be morally good and right, or at least okay, through apparently natural naivety or demonstrations that one has done their homework. Showy certainty and innocent ignorance are both strategies deployed in the face of a social reality that is dynamic and ultimate largely unknowable —a reality where there is more to know than we can ever know, especially with any stable sense of permanence and stability, given reality's unfolding nature. Instead of throwing our hands up in hopelessness or hammering fists down in righteousness, why

not be open and curious?

Western philosophy has always been fascinated with the limits of knowledge. However, humility as a response to inevitable or innate ignorance has rarely been advocated for (apart from among Christian thinkers).[4] For the Ancient Greeks and many modern thinkers, the value of boldness, argumentativeness, and confidence, given an intellectually competitive status quo, make humility look like a vice. One would be self-deprecating, and therefore self-defeating and foolish, to admit uncertainty in front of debating opponents. This is the opposite of Confucian philosophy. While a vein of possibly unproductive self-deprecation runs through some praise for humility in Confucianism, which can also be damaging given the strong sense of hierarchies commonly found in this philosophy as well, being humble is generally regarded as part of being a good, intelligent person, at the top or at the bottom. Confucius was well known for identifying himself as ignorant throughout his life, and noted how he learned from children, from opponents, from everyone always, as this is the only way to become educated and wise.[5]

Even in Mayo's paper, which apparently aims to encourage some form of humility, I wonder whether there is not still a sense of uncertainty beneath the surface when it comes to humility's value. In describing humility, Mayo references "category-related humility" and relational humility and emphasizes: "This is more than humility as a personal quality (a person's self-characterization as humble is so often suspect) but rather forms of humility related to how communities begin to understand themselves and how they maintain their sense of change as integral to who they are."

I suggest here, particularly in relation to the last comment, that humility often gets associated and confused with modesty and a false sense of modesty in contemporary western thinking, given the tendency to contrast modesty and humility with confidence, and prize the latter over the former, despite the serious epistemological and relational flaws of confidence when confidence is overemphasized. In relation, the kind of showy modesty Mayo hints at here (which may or may not be distinguishable from the strategic ignorance mentioned previously) is foreign to most of my colleagues who study Confucian philosophy in Chinese societies.[6] While humility is described by Nietzsche as

a vice of manipulation, Confucians see its relational nature in a nuanced way.[7] Yes, modesty and humility may be less than fully authentic at times, but such performances serve the purpose of practicing openness and acknowledgment of the limitations of one's knowledge. Meanwhile, the showy knowing explored in Mayo's essay would be an obvious vice in their (my) context; one can be relatively proud and confident and modest and honest all at once, through developing nuanced relational dispositions, not basing one's relations with others on competitive, binary right/wrong, confident/weak postures.[8]

Mayo's essay also reminds us that knowledge is ultimately social. It has social importance, not just academic importance. Knowledge—producing it, claiming it, sharing it—is therefore ethical. As Mayo reveals, humility is a kind of reaching out to others with an interest in learning, without aggression, smug confidence, certainty, or safety. This implies a relationship generally characterized by a sense of equity and solidarity, and reflects that social practices are more important than winning a debate or being politically correct. This kind of humility is needed vitally when discussing contentious issues in education. Going beyond the case of gender identity, it is also worth considering the importance of humility in developing relationships with students, discussing all sorts of important topics, and growing as a person who wants to learn more than to know or be correct.

It is vital to model such humility to students through the deliberate, but open-ended cultivation of just relations and practices of inclusion, solidarity, and openness. On the other hand, I fear that quality of life and education are deteriorated when people feel such pressure to either throw their hands up in hopeless ignorance or slam their fists down with conviction. The world is confusing and unsettled, and it is not possible for any single person to know everything all the time. No one should be pressured to think and feel otherwise, especially when learning is sought. In this context, let us be more cautious and critical regarding actions and relations characterized by smug arrogance, staunch certainty, close-mindedness, and incuriosity. These are not merely unattractive (in my opinion) personality traits, but ethical failings in a community that seeks to grow, learn, and develop knowledge. I thank Mayo for reflecting on humility and gender identity and hope that it encourages more appreciation for humility

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in the future.

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1 Cris Mayo, "Humility in Community: Uncertainty and Solidarity in Transgender Theory," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 4 (same issue).

2 See Liz Jackson, "Free Speech, False Polarization, and the Paradox of Tolerance," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 3 (2021): 139-145.

3 Regarding strategic ignorance, see Cris Mayo, "Certain Privilege: Rethinking White Agency," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2004): 308-316; Jennifer Logue, "The Unbelievable Truth and the Dilemmas of Ignorance: Rethinking Student Resistance in Social Justice Education," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2008): 54-62; Barbara Applebaum, "White Privilege/White Complicity: Connecting "Benefiting From" to "Contributing To"," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2008): 292-300; John Warren and Kathy Hytten, "The Faces of Whiteness: Pitfalls and the Critical Democrat," *Communication Education* 53, no. 4 (2004): 321-339.

4 Broadly, pre-Christian western philosophy can be characterized this way, in contrast with Christian and western psychological views that promote humility. For instance, Aristotle said that "anyone who esteems his own worth unduly is foolish"; Aristotle, *Ethics,* trans. J. A. K. Thomson. (London: The Folio Society, 2003), 1123b. See also Jae Park and Bae Taejin, "Toward a Pedagogy of Humility as Experience," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2022); Kent Dunnington, *Humility, Pride, and Christian Virtue Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Nancy Snow, "Theories of Humility: An Overview," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility,* eds. Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch, and Alessandra Tanesini (New York: Routledge, 2021), 9-25; Stephen Chatelier and Liz Jackson, "The Politics of Humility: Humility in Historical Christian Thought and Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2022).

5 Jin Li, "Humility in Learning: A Confucian Perspective," *Journal of Moral Education* 45, no. 2 (2016): 147–165; Sara Rushing, "What Is Confucian Humility?," in *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, eds. Stephen Angle and Michael Slote (New York: Routledge, 2013), 174-181; Kwong-loi Shun, "Dimensions of Humility in Early Confucian Thought," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 48, no. 1 (2021): 13–27; Ji Ying et al., Humility and Its Cultivation in Chinese Schools: An Exploratory Study into Teachers' Perspectives, *Asia Pacific Education Review* (2022).

6 For example, a serious consideration of modesty as a virtue held as synonymous with humility is given in William Sin, "Modesty, Confucianism, and Active Indifference," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2002).

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

8 Liz Jackson, *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

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