

THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY IN JUDAISM: A CRITIQUE OF RATIONALIST HERMENEUTICS

Daniel M. Nelson

ABSTRACT

The virtue of humility was central to the moral-religious understanding of traditional Judaism, although the significance of the virtue has yet to receive extensive attention from contemporary scholarship. An investigation of humility's role within the tradition, particularly as it illuminates the meaning of pride and idolatry, shows that an approach focusing on the moral significance of humility in isolation from its religious meaning is misleading. Humility's simultaneous meanings as true worship and as the foundation of all good works and virtues are intertwined and interdependent.

Professor Ronald M. Green's paper (1973) about humility in Judaism is valuable because it explicates and emphasizes the virtue's central and broad importance. Nevertheless, Green's attempt to show that humility is congruent with what turns out to be a particularly modern understanding of moral reason (contemporary contractual ethical theory) needs to be challenged. The prophet Micah's exhortation "to walk humbly with thy God" cannot be translated into Green's exhortation to enter impartially into the original position — at least not without considerable loss and distortion.

It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. (Micah 6:8)

I

Contemporary scholarship in religious ethics has neglected the virtue of humility. Although its role in Christian ethics has received some attention (particularly its development by Thomas Aquinas and within monasticism), its significance for Judaism has been largely ignored except for summary treatment by Jewish scholars writing broad introductions to the tradition for an English-speaking audience. Ronald M. Green's paper, "Jewish Ethics and the Virtue of Humility" (Green, 1973), one of the few pieces of recent scholarship specifically about humility in Jewish ethics, is noteworthy in that it applies the vocabulary of a particular version of modern moral theory to an analysis of the virtue.

Following an instructive description of the central role of humility within Judaism in the first half of his paper, Green begins an investigation of “whether the traditional estimate of this virtue is well founded” (1973: 58). The argument that humility is congruent with the conception of moral reason associated with Immanuel Kant and John Rawls is Green’s vehicle for concluding that Judaism’s traditional emphasis on humility is rationally justified. He says that despite Judaism’s apparent lack of concern to ground itself explicitly in reason, and despite its occasional employment of “non-rational terminology and ‘paradoxical concepts,’” “Jewish ethics is not incompatible with and reveals conclusions remarkably similar to those of contemporary rational ethical inquiry” (1973: 61–62).

This attempt to understand and legitimate the traditional Jewish virtue of humility in terms of one modern notion of moral reasoning needs to be challenged. The endeavor perpetuates a misleading distinction between religion and morality (or treats religious themes reductively) by employing a particular conception of rationalist morality as the key for decoding references to humility. The result is a distortion of the meaning and significance assigned to the virtue by the texts. The interpretive framework imposed on the material tell us too much about the interpreter and not enough about the tradition.

This paper will briefly review Green’s presentation of Rawlsian moral theory and his attempt to apply it to the virtue of humility as it appears in traditional Judaism. I will discuss features of the virtue that illustrate its irreducible religious dimensions, particularly its opposition to the vice of pride. There are significant differences, I will argue, between the humility Green associates with the “original position” of Rawls’ moral theory and the humility advocated by the Jewish tradition, differences which stem from two very different and incompatible understandings of morality. Finally, I will consider hermeneutical issues raised by Green’s approach to the material.

II

Briefly, Green’s argument proceeds as follows: he suggests that the by now familiar “ideal-contractualist ethical theory” articulated by John Rawls may be of help in evaluating the virtue of humility as it functions in Judaism. Morality, according to Green’s account of this theory, is “a rational instrumentality for ordering and settling social disputes.” The theory presents a “method of relying upon principles to which all parties to a dispute might freely agree” as *the* rational and moral means of settlement. The specific problem the theory claims to resolve is that of securing mutual agreement to principles that work to the disadvantage of one or the other party. Rawls’ “original position of equality” solves the problem by postulating an imagined situation in which rational, self-interested agents select moral rules and

procedures for distributing goods. This imagined situation produces fair results through the imposition of a supposed “veil of ignorance” that deprives the agents of any knowledge of characteristics that distinguish and advantage them as individuals. According to this account, in order to engage in rational moral decision-making, we need to employ a conceptual equivalent to such a situation as the setting for deliberation (Green, 1973: 58–59).

According to Green, humility is the trait of character above all others that “is likely to conduce to and support moral behavior” because moral reasoning requires “an abandonment of the knowledge of one’s particular strengths and weaknesses in order to enter, as one human being among others, into the procedure of moral choice” (1973: 59). As further evidence of humility’s role in moral reasoning, Green cites the humble individual’s probable inclination to adopt perspectives likely to be held by rational agents legislating within the original position of impartiality. These include a predisposition in favor of social and political liberty for the disadvantaged members of society and a willingness to accept certain kinds of economic inequalities that improve the overall lot of the most disadvantaged individuals (1973: 60–61).

Green says that “the humble man would not only likely divest himself of his particular advantages in order willingly to assume the standpoint of the original position, but in the process of doing so, he might also pay particular attention to the effect the principles he would adopt have on the poor and disadvantaged” (1973: 61). This general moral perspective, Green concludes, is what humility has really meant for Judaism. Thus, granted the rationality of the Rawlsian mode of moral reasoning, humility is a rational and valuable trait. And given the central importance of humility in Judaism (a claim Green substantiates in the first part of his paper), Jewish ethics reveals a mode of reasoning and a structure equivalent to, or at least “fully in keeping with sensitive rational reflection” (1973: 61–62).

Green is correct, I believe, in emphasizing the central importance of humility’s role within traditional Judaism. Even taking into account the characteristic hyperbole of some of the sources, it would not be a distortion to claim that humility was accorded a status equivalent to the cardinal theological virtues within the Christian tradition. Green reports that “to be humble (*zenua*) or meek (*anav*)” is to possess what the Talmud and other sources record as “the chief virtue of all” (1973: 54; Epstein, 1935–52, *’Abodah Zarah*: 20b; all subsequent references to Talmudic tractates will be to this edition; A. Cohen, 1965, *Kallah Rabbath*: 52a). The virtue is the “attitudinal ground of moral conscientiousness,” “the prerequisite to the moral life and . . . the complement of all moral acts” (1973: 54).

Humility, Green observes, is repeatedly mentioned as an essential virtue of a good Rabbi (Green, 1973: 55; *Sotah*: 21b; A. Cohen, *Derek ’Erez Rabbah*: I, 1; *Aboth*: IV, 7; VI, 5). It is a preventative and antidote to the morally corrosive evil of pride which God regards as the equivalent of idolatry

(1973: 55; *Sotah*: 4b, 5a). Humility is the equivalent of all the offerings in the Temple (*Sanhedrin*: 43b) and will be rewarded by God (*Erubin*: 13b; *Shabbath*: 104a). Even the election of Israel is attributed to the humility of the people of Israel and the Patriarchs (Green, 1973: 55–56; Schechter, 1961: 170–98). Most significantly of all, humility is identified as a central feature of God's nature (Green, 1973: 56), demonstrated by his presence on insignificant Mount Sinai and in a thornbush (*Sotah*: 5a), his care for his people, and his concern and justice for the poor (Epstein, 1939, *Exodus Rabbah*: XXV, 6 and XXX, 5; Ps. 138: 6 and Ps. 10: 16, 18).

III

One of the most important observations made in the course of Green's explication of the role of humility in Judaism is that the significance of the virtue is enmeshed in an understanding of an ideal human relationship to God. Humility requires a recognition of "one's subordinate position before God and His Law. The humble man is necessarily God-fearing" (Green, 1973: 54). Green, however, is writing to demonstrate the rational well-foundedness of humility, an enterprise that seeks evidence for the existence of impartial moral reason "beneath" the tradition's "terminology and conceptual structure" (1973: 62). He does not deny the importance within the tradition of the explicitly religious significance of humility. Nevertheless, he focuses on the moral significance of humility in isolation from its religious meaning, translating what he finds into one of the vocabularies of modern moral philosophy. Such an approach, even if its aim is to demonstrate the rationality of a religious virtue, is not compatible with the tradition's expressed understanding of the virtue.

Green's approach tends to separate the so-called moral virtue of humility from its religious context. His attempt to find a rational foundation for the supposedly nonrational terminology perpetuates the notion that Jewish *ethics* is either a manner of thinking or a code of behavior somehow distinguishable from something fundamentally different labeled *religion*. Instead, Jewish ethics and religion should be understood as a unity, and humility should be regarded as (for lack of a better term) a unified "moral-religious" virtue.¹ To be sure, as Green notes (1973: 54), humility has two orientations—to God and to social relations—but genuine humility in one case presupposes humility in the other. Humility is more than *either* religious piety *or* social modesty. In other words, a proper understanding of humility within the tradition supports the claim that an interpretive approach that effectively strains morality out of the religion of Judaism is reductive. This becomes more evident when one considers the way in which humility is opposed to pride.

For biblical and rabbinic Judaism, and for the Sages, humility is a crucial

virtue primarily because pride is the characteristic and most corrupting human offense (Green, 1973:55; Kaplan, 1971:41–43; H. Cohen, 1972:265). There are obvious and important differences between the world of the Bible, the Rabbis, and the philosophers, and certainly there was diversity in the respective understandings of humility, but there seems to be general agreement about humility's importance. Humility opposes pride, the essence of which is rebellion against God. The sources commonly see that rebellion reflected in Israel's history as idolatry and as an arrogant reliance on neighboring kings instead of on Yahweh, and refracted through the prism of social and political relations as various manifestations of injustice.

Biblical and rabbinic texts consistently equate arrogance and idolatry as "abominations." According to Proverbs 16:5–6, "Every one who is arrogant is an abomination to the Lord" and "will not go unpunished," but "by fear of the Lord a man avoids evil." Deuteronomy 8:11–20 is a sustained warning against pride, an admonition not to forget the Lord's commandments in future prosperity, not to credit human endeavor, and not to go after other gods, "Lest thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God" (Deut. 8:14). The fates of Ahitophel, of Noah's contemporaries, the builders of Babel, the Sodomites, Sennacharib, Nebuchadnessar, Pharaoh, the Israelites in the wilderness, Saul, and Israel in exile are all taken by various texts as illustrative of inevitable Divine punishment of different displays of pridefulness generally construed as "defiance of God" (Kadushin, 1938:147–148).

Not only did the sages view "haughtiness" as a denial of "the essential principle of our religion," Maimonides (1135–1204) notes at the beginning of *Mishneh Torah*, but pride is one of the dispositions with regard to which it is forbidden to keep the "middle path" and which "must be shunned to the extreme" by the cultivation of humility (Twersky, 1972:54). In the *Path of the Upright (Mesillat Yesharim)*, Luzzatto (1707–47) calls attention to biblical and rabbinic warnings against pride, lists various of its manifestations, and cautions his readers,

Pride deprives of reason those who are masters of wisdom . . . [I]t is said, "Everyone that is proud in his heart is an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 16:5). Whoever would attain the trait of cleanness must be free from the taint of pride. (Kaplan, 1948:102–106)

Yonah Gerondi's twelfth-century treatise, *The Gates of Repentance (Shaarei Teshuvah)*, particularly emphasizes the association of pride with wrongdoing. He notes that "pride results in many transgressions and brings one's evil inclination to bear more strongly upon him," and that "pride is the 'tillage of the wicked' [Prov. 21:4] in that sins sprout from it." Because of pride, "the poor is hotly pursued" (Psalms 10:2), the righteous are slandered (Psalms 31:19), and there is "terror in the land of the living" (Ezekiel 32:26)" (Silverstein, 1967:37–39).

This theme remains essentially unchanged in Rav Kook's early twentieth-century explication of the relation between pride and wrongdoing in *The Moral Principles*. Pride vitiates goodness, vulgarizing and defiling the individual so that repentance is checked, one's apprehension of purity is obstructed, and one's will is tainted to the extent that all virtue is inhibited. Pride "engenders laziness," "is the grossest kind of folly," and "is in itself the fiercest kind of retribution." On the other hand, "All thoughts that arise in the heart of one who truly hates pride become words of Torah" (Kook, 1978: 153–54).

The obverse of everything negative said about pride is true of humility. Bahya (1050–1156) begins his discussion of humility in *The Duties of the Heart (al-Hidāya ila Fara'id al-Qulub)* by explaining why a consideration of humility directly follows his discussion of pride, the "first misfortune" and the "most harmful" of human acts. Humility, he says, "may drive away pride. We know also that humility is the root of all worship. It is what distinguishes servitude from sovereignty. It is the affirmation that sovereignty may be attributed to God alone, and not to any of the created beings" (Mansoor, 1973: 304).

For Bahya, humility is at the "beginning of repentance" and is the prerequisite to any "voluntary work of obedience" (Mansoor, 1973: 322). He defines humility as spiritual meekness and submissiveness and divides it into three categories of increasing importance and excellence: the unthinking humility appropriate to animals, children, and the mentally deficient; that which is appropriately rendered to an individual's superiors in social relations; and the highest kind of humility directed toward God. This highest humility, upon which Bahya builds much of his doctrine of the heart's duties, is "an obligation which covers all human beings and is binding upon them at all times and everywhere. . . . [W]hoever has attained it is not far from the path that leads to the nearness and presence of God, and his acts are acceptable to God and please him" (Mansoor, 1973: 305–07). The conclusion of Bahya's exposition is that "all obligations and good works" are "dependent on humility which is the mainstay and chief source of them all" (1973: 322).

Gerondi similarly distinguishes degrees of humility and likewise identifies the essence of humility as the magnification of God and glorification of serving him, "taking no credit for oneself, minimizing everything in one's eyes in consideration of one's obligations in the service of God" (Silverstein, 1967: 35). The thirteenth- or fourteenth-century treatise attributed to Zerachia Ha-Yavani, *The Book of the Righteous (Sefer Hayashar)*, repeatedly identifies a variety of expressions of humility as the essential difference between the wicked and the righteous (S. Cohen, 1973: 252–60). Luzzatto's ranked catalogue of virtues places humility over saintliness and beneath the fear of sin, the predecessor to the highest virtue of holiness (Kaplan, 1948: 9). The righteous are described by Kook as crowned with a "noble humility" based on "holy greatness" (1978: 167, 176). He explicitly describes humility's associa-

tion with “spiritual perfection” (1978: 176) and places it “at the summit of moral attributes” (1978: 361).

The point of this litany — that humility can only reductively be analyzed as *either* a specifically moral *or* a specifically religious virtue — is supported by Max Kadushin’s comments on humility in his study of rabbinic thinking. He observes that the social and religious meanings of humility are intertwined and expressed in a variety of interlocking ways, that “humility is the ethical trait with the highest religious significance,” and that the Rabbis understood humility in social relations as evidence of “complete obedience to God” (Kadushin, 1938: 148–151).

A more comprehensive exposition of humility in Judaism could develop at length the extent to which the sources present different examples and varieties of humility, explore its motivations, offer advice on how it is to be engendered, attempt to distinguish genuine from false humility, list a wide variety of internal and external evidences, and extol the benefits of its cultivation and exercise. Although an analysis of the relationship between humble thought and humble behavior could be attempted, the evidence suggests that the sources were reluctant to press the distinction too far except for the purpose of castigating a feigned humility. Genuine humility consists in the proper attitudes and perceptions of the self in relation to God expressed and reinforced by public and private behavior. Humility before God and Torah consists not only in attitude but also in action.

As I have already suggested, one should avoid imposing a strong distinction between humility as a religious and moral virtue, which is the effect of Green’s attempt to look “beneath” the religious language for a rationally grounded morality. Although it is possible to trace, on one hand, connections between humility and ostensibly religious themes of worship, repentance, and messianism, or, on the other hand, connections between humility and moral themes of justice, equality, poverty, and authority, what one discovers in looking for distinctions are two sides of one coin. The tradition does not lend itself to the kind of analysis that presupposes religious language can be translated into the language of rationalist ethics.

For many purposes it is misleading and unproductive to think of Judaism itself as a single tradition. But even at the level of generality at which it is possible responsibly to talk about a tradition, and about the significance and contours of one of its specific themes, such as humility, an appreciation for the diverse understandings of that theme is not precluded. Although an analysis of the *different* ways in which the virtue of humility has figured in Judaism would be well worth pursuing, it remains the case that some important generalizations can still be made: The later texts are in agreement with the rabbinic and biblical material that the presence or absence of humility as a moral virtue in human relations is indicative of its presence or absence in an individual’s or a community’s relation to God. For the Rabbis, insofar

as a distinction between humility's moral and religious dimensions exists in fact, it is a distinction under attack. Kadushin stresses the significance for rabbinic thought of humility's "dual character" as "*both* a desirable trait in all social relationships *and* a sign of obedience . . . and cleavage to God.":

That meekness which, in social life, expresses itself in various attitudes, be it in the readiness to forgive trespasses against oneself or in the utter absence of any taint of arrogance—such meekness is of a piece with a pious acceptance of whatever is meted out by God, and unshaken loyalty to Him. (Kadushin, 1938: 151)

IV

In the first part of his paper, Green's careful description of humility's role and importance makes clear that its significance is enmeshed in an understanding of an ideal human relationship to God, but his endeavor to legitimate the virtue as rational by attempting to ground it in a theory of moral reason wrenches humility out of its religious context. The transition from description to evaluation according to a preconceived notion of moral rationality has the effect of filtering out humility's religious significance.

For Judaism, however, humility is explicitly claimed to be "well founded" because it is required by God as an essential characteristic of the proper divine-human relationship, the relation of a creature to its creator. It is as though humility were one of the terms of the Covenant; it is part of what it means to honor God. As God himself manifests humility in his concern for Israel, for the weak, and for the poor, so should the righteous Jew manifest humility in human relations and in worship. In other words, the prophet Micah's exhortation to "walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6: 8)² cannot be translated into Green's exhortation to enter humbly into the original position without considerable loss and distortion—unless one accepts the presupposed claim that what Kant, Rawls, and Green say about morality is what the religious tradition has been saying all along.³

Related to the problems inherent in trying to ground Judaism's estimation of humility in this particular version of moral reason is what might be labeled the problem of self-interest. There is a problematic tension between the characteristics required within the original position and the characteristics of humility required by Judaism. Green sees a virtual identity of the two attitudes: "The humble man is not only likely to appreciate and assume the basic standpoint of moral choice demanded by reason, but within that standpoint, he would be guided to a solicitousness for the disadvantaged, which, if Rawls is correct, is itself rational" (1973: 61).

But there is more to the basic standpoint of moral choice than a step behind the veil of ignorance and the assumption of solicitous attitudes. On closer

examination, Green's exemplary rational agents seem, in many respects, significantly different from the humble individuals described in the Jewish texts. Green's agents, for the purpose of resolving social disputes, enter into the original position where they "are assumed to be . . . interested in advancing their own plan of life" (Green, 1973: 58). They are described as autonomous, rational, self-interested wills. They enter into the choice procedure in order to escape arbitrary resolution of their disputes by coercion or external authority. Once within the original position and behind the veil of ignorance, their choice of principles is the result of the "maximin" strategy of maximizing "the pay-off in rights and income accruing to the least-off or minimum position into which one might fall" (Green, 1973: 60). The reason for choosing such a strategy is that in the original position "one cannot successfully calculate the odds" of a greater pay-off or a riskier bet. Green's rational self-interested agents realize there is "relatively little to gain and a great deal to lose by gambling" on being advantaged by less egalitarian principles (Green, 1973: 60).

Granting, for the sake of argument, a lack of more attractive alternatives, one of *us* might well be inclined to consider playing along with the Rawlsian procedure for the purpose of resolving some social disputes. But for traditional Judaism, that purpose is a questionable description of morality, and the important justifications for humility within the tradition appear to have little to do with the kind of self-interest that motivates Green's autonomous rational agents in the hypothetical choice situation.⁴ The Jew is to be humble because God is humble; because God requires humility of his people; because he particularly cares for the poor and oppressed; because humility opposes the abomination of pride, the equivalent of idolatry; and because humility is the basis and chief characteristic of the righteous life. To be sure, humility sometimes accrues practical advantages, in the sense that virtue is sometimes rewarded in this life, but a humility practiced for the sake of advantage is false.

Bahya cautions his readers against living "for the purpose of worldly advantage," insisting that they be motivated by "love alone" (Collins, 1908: 16). He says we are to "humble ourselves before [the Creator] . . . and to concentrate all our efforts upon good deeds that are absolutely disinterested and only motivated by love of God" so that "all right conduct and right thought must follow without effort on our part, because our will is one through His, through love" (1908: 18–19). Likewise, Maimonides says that humility follows from a recognition of the "incomparable and infinite" majesty and wisdom of God (Maimonides, 1972: 45–46).

When a man reflects on these things, studies all the created beings, from the angels and spheres down to human beings and so on, and realizes the Divine wisdom in them all, his love for God will increase. . . . He will be filled with fear and trembling, as he becomes conscious of his own lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance. . . . He will then realize he is a vessel full of shame, dishonor, and reproach, empty and deficient (Maimonides, 1972: 48).

Although my concern is to offer a critique of Green's evaluation and appropriation of the virtue of humility and not to comment extensively on the larger theory of morality that he advocates, I should acknowledge my disagreements with this method of moral reasoning, useful as it may be in some contexts. I doubt that morality is necessarily or primarily a "rational instrumentality for ordering and settling social disputes" (Green, 1973: 58), or that the method in question is relevant to all or most historical and cultural contexts. I also doubt that reason requires the practice of such a method by us. My reservations have to do with the conception of reason Green presupposes and with the claim, implicit in Green's account, that there is a suprahistorical, universal, or transcendental moral perspective available to us.⁵

Some such perspective is lurking behind Green's question of "whether the traditional Jewish estimate of [humility] is well founded" (1973: 58). There are, of course, different ways of pursuing that question. It may have to do with whether or not there are good reasons for us to cultivate the virtue. On the other hand, it may have to do with a judgment about the functioning of the virtue specifically within traditional Judaism. Green conflates the two questions while I want to keep them separate.

It appears that for Green the answer to the question of whether the virtue is "well founded" for us is identical to the answer of whether the virtue is well founded for Jewish ethics because, given his assumptions about the nature of reason and morality, these are actually the same question. He asks, "In what sense can it be said that the stance of humility is central to the moral life and is, indeed, the precondition of all other moral attainments?" (1973: 58). The sense in which Jewish claims on behalf of humility are warranted, it turns out, is the extent to which humility is congruent with a particular theory of moral reason. Green's universal test of humility's moral rationality—as applicable to traditional Judaism as it is to us—is whether or not humility is compatible with and conducive to the Rawlsian decision-making procedure for resolving social disputes. Because of my doubts about the applicability of this conception of morality to contexts beyond the one in which it was conceived, I do not believe the procedure is automatically relevant to a discussion of the role played by humility within traditional Judaism. Whether or not humility passes Green's test tells us nothing (nor should it be expected to tell us anything) about whether traditional Judaism was right in valuing humility so highly.

The version of humility that passes Green's test is different from the version portrayed in the tradition's texts because the questions he asks lead him to find more moral philosophy and less religion than actually is there. Because of its imposition of an historically specific standard of rationality for which it assumes a universal and supra-historical status, the standpoint from which Green investigates the well-foundedness of humility imposes distortions on the tradition. Green's method tends to treat religious themes cava-

lierly by separating the rational from the religious significance of the virtue, or at least by translating religious language into a contemporary moral vocabulary. But according to the tradition, the “non-rational” religious language is central and controlling. The usefulness of judging the rationality of humility within Judaism by means of Rawlsian moral theory is doubtful to the extent that it forces an alien notion of rationality on the tradition. Green’s rational justification of humility within traditional Judaism and his discussion of the virtue in terms of contemporary moral theory obscures the piety that gave Judaism’s understanding of humility its distinctiveness.

Whereas Green sees in Judaism’s estimation of humility a stratum of universal moral reason beneath a “non-rational terminology and ‘paradoxical’ concepts” (1973: 62), I suggest we see in Judaism’s traditional terminology and concepts a vocabulary different from but neither more nor less rational than the vocabulary employed by contemporary secular moral theory. It may even be the case that the traditional vocabulary worked more successfully for some purposes than does our own. Given the differences between the biblical, rabbinic, or medieval worlds and the world we inhabit, and given the difference in vocabularies and in the issues the vocabularies address, there might well be continuity but most likely not identity in the respective estimations of humility. In a context other than that of traditional Jewish piety, humility can still have a significance informed by the traditional conception, but differences in meaning require as much attention as similarities.

The project of understanding and appropriating intact the vocabulary of a tradition historically or culturally different from one’s own seems especially precarious and fraught with paradox when it concerns the virtue of humility, arguably a cardinal hermeneutical virtue. The project is precarious because of the temptation to protect our supposed achievement of understanding from erosion. Hermeneutical humility, if cultivated, would incline us to see our point of view and access to other cultures, epochs, texts, and traditions as conditioned by our own origins and surroundings. If a proper humility characterized attempts to understand, the inevitable traces of anachronistic interpretation present in even the most careful and sympathetic translations of one vocabulary into another would be more readily acknowledged. A humble approach to understanding another moral tradition would lean against the compulsion to ferret out similarities and against the inclination to explain differences by relegating them to the periphery of morality or by discerning within them disguised articulations of one’s own intuitions. Such an approach would aim first and most at description, resisting the inclination to resort to explanations that facilely account for a wide variety of detail.

The project of judging Judaism’s understanding of humility to be rationally well founded and of situating the virtue within the context of a contemporary rationalist scheme of ethics also seems somewhat paradoxical. It not

only effectively denies Judaism's professed understanding of the religious meanings of humility, awkwardly implicating the moralist professing autonomous practical reason in what the tradition would characterize as prideful self-righteousness. The attempt also implicitly claims universal and transhistorical validity for its own perspective. Michael Oakshott has described the rationalism pervading that perspective as our culture's Tower of Babel, observing that "the morality of the Rationalist is the morality of the self-made man and of the self-made society: it is what other peoples have recognized as 'idolatry'" (1981: 35). The rationalist project treats the *creature* of histories, traditions, and distinctive understandings of the good and the right as their uncreated *creator*. For traditional Judaism, however, the virtue of humility was "grounded" in an acknowledgment of creatureliness and a denial of autonomy. Even in the absence of that tradition's piety, contemporary discussion about ethics would do well to be instructed by its virtues.⁶

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Stout discusses the problem of finding a terminology for talking about undesirable distinctions in *The Flight from Authority* (1981: 245–48). He notes the distortions that follow from inquiring too closely into the relation between religion and morality in a culture in which no such distinction is made and which possesses "an ethics which must be understood as a whole or not at all." As he points out, even the discussion of the imposed distinctions as problematic creates an "air of paradox." Stout suggests that the paradox can best be avoided in the course of translation and commentary by "attending in detail to . . . the 'open texture' of the concepts, by *describing* the fuzziness that is there. Our temptation is to think a clearer picture would be a better one. But this is not the case where clarity would be reductive and would therefore reveal less."

2. I am indebted to an anonymous reader of an earlier draft for observing that scholars are no longer confident that the original Hebrew refers to humility. Nevertheless, the passage has traditionally been understood in the way I construe it here.

3. Green argues in support of this claim in his book *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief* (1978).

4. Neither Rawls nor Green claim that actual moral agents should be self-interested. Self-interest, according to the theory, is only a conceptual necessity for moral reasoning. Green, however, is using the perspective of agents in the hypothetical choice situation to legitimate the Jewish estimation of humility, and there is a profound tension between the two points of view.

5. For a more detailed critique of the moral rationalism of Green and Rawls, see chapters 10 and 11 in Stout's *The Flight from Authority* (1981: 201–56). For an extended critical discussion of Rawls, see *Understanding Rawls* (Wolff, 1977) and *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Sandel, 1982).

6. I wish to thank Jeffrey Stout, Martha Himmelfarb, and Ronald Green for their

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