

## IS INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY COMPATIBLE WITH POLITICAL CONVICTION?

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THERE is a profound lack of respect, tolerance, and empathy in contemporary politics. Within the past few decades, political opponents have steadily grown to dislike, distrust, fear, and loathe each other; moreover, members of polarized groups perceive one another as closed minded, arrogant, and immoral.<sup>1</sup> However, new empirical research suggests that intellectual humility may be useful in bridging political divisions.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, a growing number of psychologists and philosophers maintain that intellectual humility is an antidote to some of democracy's ills.

We are enthusiastic about the potential value of intellectual humility in politics, but we also want to sound a note of caution. In a review of recent work on intellectual humility, Nathan Ballantyne reminds us that intellectual humility may have “dark sides.”<sup>3</sup> In this paper, we develop this cautionary point by exploring three ways in which intellectual humility may threaten political conviction. In section 2, we examine how intellectually humble citizens are more likely to encounter diverse political perspectives, which may, in turn, lead to a lack of political engagement. In section 3, we argue that intellectual humility tends to facilitate empathy for political opponents, which may lead to a loss of conviction in one's own views. In section 4, we argue that intellectually humble citizens are better “epistemically calibrated” than other people but also that good epistemic calibration often demands a lack of confidence about political issues. Our argument does not spoil claims about the potential

- 1 See Tanesini and Lynch, *Polarisation, Arrogance, and Dogmatism*; and Iyengar “The Polarization of American Politics.”
- 2 See Hodge et al., “Political Humility”; Hodge et al., “Political Humility and Forgiveness of a Political Hurt or Offense”; Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman, “Intellectual Humility in the Sociopolitical Domain” and “Sociopolitical Intellectual Humility as a Predictor of Political Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions”; Porter and Schumann, “Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View”; and Stanley, Sinclair, and Seli, “Intellectual Humility and Perceptions of Political Opponents.”
- 3 Ballantyne, “Recent Work on Intellectual Humility.”

benefits of intellectual humility, but it should encourage a more cautious sense of how intellectual humility might function in political life.

Toward the end of the paper, we identify some alternative ways of relating intellectual humility to political conviction. In section 5, we argue that intellectual humility could develop into a form of *political quietism* that is modeled by philosophical conservatives such as Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott. We describe three general features of such a quietist stance, each interpretable as a form of intellectual humility: diffidence, reticence, and modesty. The availability of these forms of quietism should complicate our thinking about the relationships between intellectual humility, political conviction, and various political stances.

### 1. HUMILITY AND POLITICAL CONVICTION

The systematic study of intellectual humility and its roles in politics is relatively young, doubtless buoyed by the emergence of virtue epistemology and increasing concerns about the lack of humility in recent political cultures, at least in the United States and the United Kingdom. The early empirical results, however, are encouraging. There is evidence that intellectual humility is associated with reduced affective polarization; those with higher levels of intellectual humility are less likely to derogate the character, competence, and capabilities of political outgroup members; intellectually humble people are more respectful and tolerant of others; they display greater openness to learning about rival positions; they are more empathetic toward those with whom they disagree; they report more positive experiences when discussing politics and are more likely to engage in political discussions.<sup>4</sup> All this indicates that intellectual humility could play a vital role in politics and public discourse. We can therefore regard intellectual humility as a democratic ideal for citizens. As Michael P. Lynch writes in *Know-It-All Society*, “intellectual humility . . . is a crucial attitude for inquiry and, I believe, for democracy itself.”

At the same time, intellectual humility seems to be in tension with another democratic ideal—namely, *political conviction*. It is widely believed that a

4 Bowes et al., “Intellectual Humility and Between-Party Animus”; Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman, “Intellectual Humility in the Sociopolitical Domain” and “Sociopolitical Intellectual Humility as a Predictor of Political Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions”; Stanley, Sinclair, and Seli, “Intellectual Humility and Perceptions of Political Opponents”; Krumrei-Mancuso and Rouse, “The Development and Validation of the Comprehensive Intellectual Humility Scale”; Leary et al., “Cognitive and Interpersonal Features of Intellectual Humility”; Krumrei-Mancuso, “Intellectual Humility and Prosocial Values”; Porter and Schumann, “Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View”; and Johnson “Humility and the Toleration of Diverse Ideas.”

flourishing democracy requires people with convictions. As Lynch puts it, “an apathetic electorate is an obviously ineffective electorate.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, a tension emerges between the need for people to have and to act on the courage of their convictions, on the one hand, while also maintaining appropriate forms and degrees of humility about those convictions, on the other hand. A key worry is that if intellectual humility does lead to a lack of conviction, it could have sinister implications for politics. For example, a citizen who abandons their convictions may become susceptible to bad arguments, misinformation, invidious conspiracy theories, political manipulation, ideological apathy, misological incapacitation, and other politico-epistemic hazards. At the same time, too much conviction can lead to arrogance, dogmatism, dialectical incapacitation, interpersonal frustrations and tensions, and other serious problems.<sup>6</sup>

In the literature on intellectual humility, the standard view is the optimistic one that intellectual humility and political conviction do not conflict. (We will call this “the standard view” in what follows.) Lynch assures us that “intellectual humility is not an opponent of conviction” and “not antithetical to critical political engagement.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Duncan Pritchard says it is wrong to equate humility with a lack of conviction, since individuals can be both high in intellectual humility and ideological commitment.<sup>8</sup> In psychology, Tenelle Porter and Karina Schumann found that “those higher in intellectual humility did not differ from others in the strength of their political views.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Elizabeth J. Krumrei-Mancuso and Brian Newman found that “sociopolitical intellectual humility was distinct from political apathy and indifference.”<sup>10</sup> In short, intellectual humility does not *require* any unwelcome changes in our political conviction.<sup>11</sup>

By and large, we agree with the standard view. Intellectual humility should not be *equated* with, or defined in terms of, apathy, lack of ideological commitment, or a loss or lack of conviction. An individual can simultaneously

5 Lynch, “Conviction and Humility,” 139.

6 See Nadelhoffer et al., “Partisanship, Humility, and Epistemic Polarisation”; McIntyre, “Science Denial, Polarisation, and Arrogance.”

7 Lynch, *Know-It-All Society*, 150–51.

8 Pritchard, “Intellectual Humility and the Epistemology of Disagreement.”

9 Porter and Schumann, “Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View.” For a similar view, see Hodge et al., “Political Humility and Forgiveness of a Political Hurt or Offense.”

10 Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman, “Intellectual Humility in the Sociopolitical Domain.”

11 According to Lynch, “intellectual humility ... is an attitude that requires *confidence*” (*Know-It-All Society*, 150). For similar claims, see Kidd, “Intellectual Humility, Confidence, and Argumentation”; and Tanesini, *The Mismeasure of the Self*, pt. 2.

hold strong political beliefs and be humble, so there is no constitutive conflict between intellectual humility and political conviction. However, this sanguine claim does not, by itself, deliver a wholly optimistic conclusion. First, previous research on the relationship between intellectual humility and political conviction has ignored empirical and theoretical work indicating that intellectual humility *does* often result in apathy or lack of political conviction. Second, there are different forms or kinds of intellectual humility, which can relate to political conviction in many ways. In what follows, we highlight three ways intellectual humility could threaten conviction in political contexts.

## 2. ISSUE ONE: EXPOSURE TO DIVERSITY

According to new research in psychology, intellectually humble agents display greater openness to learning about rival positions and more willingness to seek out such information. For example, Porter and Schumann found that people with high intellectual humility tend to expose themselves to a greater proportion of opposing political perspectives and are more open to learning about the opposition's views during imagined disagreements.<sup>12</sup> Intellectual humility is also associated with a willingness to befriend political opponents, including "friending" and "following" on social media. In contrast, those low in intellectual humility are less willing to seek out and seriously consider opposing perspectives, and they are less willing to "friend" and "follow" their political opponents.<sup>13</sup>

Such findings support the claim that intellectual humility is good for democratic politics. Democracy is defective when citizens are insulated in echo chambers that reinforce and amplify their own perspectives, cutting them off from contrary views. Echo chambers lead to dogmatism, segregation, and polarization, which can reflect and reinforce social divisions and antagonisms. Maintaining the health of democracy requires that we foster discussions across lines of political difference.

What happens, though, when people actually interact with those who have different political views? A depressing finding in political science is that citizens who interact in these ways tend to become *less politically engaged*. Exposure to diverse perspectives and the experience of deliberating with people who hold contrary views tends to make citizens *ambivalent* and *apathetic* about politics. In *Hearing the Other Side*, Diana Mutz explores the inherent tension between

12 Porter and Schumann, "Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View."

13 Stanley, Sinclair, and Seli, "Intellectual Humility and Perceptions of Political Opponents." Of course, one could also follow one's political opponents on social media for other reasons, such as keeping an eye on what they are doing.

promoting a society with enthusiastically participative citizens and promoting one imbued with tolerance and respect for differences of opinion.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on abundant empirical research, she concludes that *participatory democracy* is at odds with *deliberative democracy*. Mutz writes, “although diverse political networks foster a better understanding of multiple perspectives on issues and encourage political tolerance, they *discourage* political participation.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the civic virtue of humility seems to pull against the democratic duty to be politically engaged. While intellectual humility encourages people to seek out diverse perspectives and form crosscutting social networks, it may also foster political ambivalence and apathy.

These results cast doubt on two common assumptions: first, that exposure to differing political views is unquestionably a good thing for democracy, and second, that there is no conflict between intellectual humility and the democratic ideal of an engaged, deliberative public. While the intellectually humble may better live up to the *deliberative* ideals of tolerance, mutual respect, and open-mindedness, this may come at the expense of the *participatory* ideal of voting, lobbying, and other ways of realizing one’s political convictions. This casts some doubt on the standard view, defended by psychologists and philosophers, that intellectual humility is neither an “opponent of conviction” nor “antithetical to critical political engagement.”<sup>16</sup> As the research above demonstrates, people who seek out diverse perspectives and deliberate with people who hold contrary views—two common symptoms of intellectual humility—tend to become ambivalent and apathetic about politics.

There may be ways to reconcile this tension, albeit with some conceptual work. We suspect the tension may partly be the result of researchers in different fields using similar notions (e.g., “engagement” and “apathy”) to pick out different phenomena. For example, it may be that psychologists are characterizing “political engagement” as an openness to learning about the opposition’s view, whereas political scientists measure engagement by a willingness to vote, lobby, contribute to a political campaign, and other forms of political activity.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, it may be that psychologists and philosophers take “apathy” to be a

14 Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*.

15 Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*, 3.

16 Lynch, *Know-It-All Society*, 150–51.

17 For a case from psychology, see Porter and Schumann, “Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View.” For a case from political science, see Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*. That said, Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman (in “Intellectual Humility in the Sociopolitical Domain”) characterize political engagement in terms of (a) interest in politics, (b) attitudes toward participation in political discussions, and (c) likelihood to report voting in a recent election or otherwise participate in political life.

lack of confidence in belief or not caring about politics, whereas political scientists measure apathy by one's willingness to publicly express and defend one's political views.<sup>18</sup> Such conceptual and terminological differences may cause confusions and mistaken generalizations about what the data show. A lack of shared concepts tends to obscure important differences between the various proposals, making it difficult to know what we have learned so far.

Once we clarify the relevant notions, we may find that intellectual humility and political conviction conflict along some dimensions but not others. For example, Mutz investigates why exposure to diverse perspectives might discourage political participation.<sup>19</sup> She considers the idea that encountering political information that challenges one's views may lead people to be *uncertain of their own positions* and therefore less likely to take political action. If this is correct, then being exposed to diverse perspectives will threaten one's political convictions. But there is an alternative explanation: those embedded in crosscutting social networks may *feel uncomfortable taking sides* in the face of multiple constituencies. Many people dislike heated arguments, intractable debates, and all the consequent emotional strife. These people may avoid politics to maintain interpersonal social harmony. In other words, the first explanation posits an *intrapersonal conflict* about what to believe or support, while the second explanation posits *interpersonal conflict* that threatens social relationships. According to Mutz, political ambivalence is primarily due to interpersonal social concerns. If this is correct, then intellectual humility may not diminish strength in one's political views. One feels just as strongly about some political issue as one did before, but one keeps quiet about it to avoid strife. More research is needed to disentangle these hypotheses and to reconcile the alleged conflict between intellectual humility and participatory democracy.

### 3. ISSUE TWO: EMPATHY

A second optimistic claim is that intellectual humility also facilitates empathy.<sup>20</sup> Of course, empathy is a complicated concept, and there are many different accounts of what it is. On one popular account, empathy is the set of capacities that enables one person to take on, or share, the perspective of another. This connects rather naturally to common conceptions of intellectual humility.

18 Contrast Krumrei-Mancuso and Newman, "Intellectual Humility in the Sociopolitical Domain"; Porter and Schumann, "Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View"; and Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*.

19 Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*, 102–22.

20 Krumrei-Mancuso, "Intellectual Humility and Prosocial Values"; and Johnson, "Humility and the Toleration of Diverse Ideas."

The humble person is better able to imagine the world from different points of view, distinct from their own, which is an ability abjectly lacking in their arrogant and dogmatic counterparts. Insofar as one can “think” or “feel” one’s way into a distinct perspective, one might be less likely to regard those who disagree with them as immoral, stupid, lazy, or dishonest. Instead of characterizing others simplistically or in caricature, intellectually humble agents tend to see the humanity in people on the other side of the political spectrum.<sup>21</sup> If so, intellectual humility fosters more constructive deliberation, cooperation, and the ability to work toward common goals. For these reasons, empathic understanding is deeply important to political life.<sup>22</sup>

Determining whether empathy is compatible with political conviction will ultimately depend on how one conceives of empathy. On some recent accounts, empathy is not perfectly compatible with political conviction. For example, Olivia Bailey has argued that it is difficult for us to sustain empathic representation without regarding that perspective as to some degree appropriate.<sup>23</sup> My realization that I empathize with my colleague’s frustration about some issue, for instance, will incline me to think she is right to feel frustrated. According to Bailey, it is not only possible but also *likely* that an empathic attitude toward another’s perspective will incline us toward that perspective. If empathy inclines us to see the validity of the other’s perspective, then empathy seems in tension with retaining one’s conviction. We cannot retain our original convictions if empathy leads us to adjust them in the direction of the perspective and the person with whom we empathize.

We can respond to this worry in different ways. An obvious option is to reject the claim that empathizing with a perspective *P* typically or usually leads one to regard *P* as appropriate. Person *A* could empathize with person *B* and come to find *B*’s perspective *intelligible* but not appropriate. I could see *why* you are so angry with a colleague—given a history of tension, failing to “gel,” and professional conflicts—without also coming to consider your responses *appropriate*. In other words, I may *get* why you acted as you did but not think you *should* have acted as you did. Intelligibility and appropriateness are quite different things. Another option is to reject the conception of empathy as “perspective taking.” Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, Matthew Ratcliffe argues that empathy is more akin to a perception-like exploration of a person’s perspective

21 This is not unquestionably a good thing. It may be a moral failing to successfully empathize with truly horrific outlooks, even if it is an epistemic achievement of sorts. However, we set such cases aside.

22 Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy*; and Hannon, “Empathetic Understanding and Deliberative Democracy.”

23 Bailey, “Empathy and Testimonial Trust.”



or world, one that presupposes differences as well as similarities between the experiential worlds of the empathizer and the empathizee.<sup>24</sup> There can be many people with whom we empathize whose experiences we cannot “simulate” in any real sense—those with chronic psychiatric illnesses, intense suffering, or life experiences too radically different from anything we have experienced ourselves.<sup>25</sup> We cannot “take on” or simulate those experiences, but we can *explore* them as one would an unfamiliar place, through sustained, tentative processes sustained by interactions, imagination, and trust. Indeed, this conception of empathy as mutual exploration of the experiential world of another arguably embeds a distinctive kind of intellectual humility that is rooted in recognition of radical differences in the structures and contents of different people’s experiences.

Suppose we stick with the account of empathy as perspective taking. We then run into another *prima facie* tension. On the one hand, intellectual humility is vital to political life insofar as it helps us deliberate with those who have different convictions and outlooks. On the other hand, intellectual humility facilitates the development of empathy, which may lead one to agree, to some extent, with the perspective of others, including those with very different political views. Here, we should distinguish between two claims. First, one might argue it is a *constitutive* feature of empathy that we regard the target perspective as to some degree *appropriate*. Adam Smith bound empathy to an appreciation of the “propriety” of others’ emotions.<sup>26</sup> Alternatively, one might argue that empathy often *inclines us without necessitating us* toward the perspectives of others. When we empathize with someone, we *sometimes* adjust our beliefs in their direction, but there is no necessity to do so. This is a general psychological claim about human behavior, not a constitutive claim about the nature of empathy, and the extent to which it actually obtains may be shaped by wider contextual factors. Of course, the psychological claim is much weaker. It is possible for empathizers to stay confident in their political convictions, at least in some cases. In contrast, the constitutive claim would challenge the compatibility between empathy and conviction, as it would be impossible to empathize with a person without seeing the validity of their perspective.

To dispel confusion about this issue, one must articulate whether the compatibility of intellectual humility and conviction is to be interpreted as a claim about what is *possible* versus what is *likely*. As a matter of psychological fact, empathy may often lead individuals to lose some degree of confidence in their initial view; but this does not necessarily imply that empathy is incompatible

24 Ratcliffe, “Empathy without Simulation.”

25 Carel and Kidd, “Suffering as Transformative Experience.”

26 Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.



with conviction. Much turns on precisely what one means by “incompatible” and “conviction.”<sup>27</sup> Even if empathizers *are* often inclined toward the perspectives of others, this may not be a *necessary* feature of empathy. Even if empathizers always decrease their confidence in belief to some degree, they may still hold their beliefs with a high level of conviction. Moreover, we could consider different conceptions of empathy, such as the explorationist account offered by Ratcliffe. Given these options, we should be more cautious before endorsing the hopeful thought that intellectual humility fosters empathy.

#### 4. ISSUE THREE: EPISTEMIC CALIBRATION

According to many theorists, intellectually humble people are *better epistemically calibrated*, meaning they more accurately assess the plausibility of evidence and arguments, are better at forming beliefs on the basis of the evidence, and have a more accurate sense of their cognitive limits and fallibility.<sup>28</sup> Nancy Snow maintains that humility is a form of self-knowledge of one’s limitations.<sup>29</sup> Allan Hazlett says it requires a proper assessment of the epistemic statuses of one’s first-order doxastic attitudes.<sup>30</sup> In other words, an intellectually humble agent is disposed to believe responsibly—on the basis of available evidence—and disposed to form largely accurate evaluations of their own epistemic standing.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, those who lack intellectual humility are disposed to bad epistemic conduct: they believe irresponsibly and form inaccurate evaluations of their own epistemic strengths and weaknesses.

What is the relationship between epistemic calibration and confidence in belief? It is often said that awareness of one’s epistemic limits is not associated

27 We also suspect that scholars mean different things by “empathy,” but we set this point aside.

28 The idea that intellectual humility fundamentally involves what I call “epistemic calibration” is widely defended. See Snow, “Humility”; Church and Barrett, “Intellectual Humility”; Hoyle et al., “Holding Specific Views with Humility”; Leary et al., “Cognitive and Interpersonal Features of Intellectual Humility”; Porter and Schumann, “Intellectual Humility and Openness to the Opposing View”; Bowes et al., “Intellectual Humility and Between-Party Animus”; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., “Links between Intellectual Humility and Acquiring Knowledge.” Whitcomb et al. (in “Intellectual Humility”) dismiss the idea that intellectual humility consists in a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic statuses of one’s beliefs; but for a reply, see Snow, “Intellectual Humility.”

29 Snow, “Humility.”

30 Hazlett, “Higher-Order Epistemic Attitudes and Intellectual Humility.”

31 Thus, intellectual humility does not require us to undervalue our capabilities and ourselves. A person might recognize their accomplishments, skills, talents, etc., and yet still be humble about them.

with less confidence in belief but rather with how one *interacts* with one's beliefs.<sup>32</sup> To be intellectually humble means we need to be *thoughtful* in choosing our convictions—to not be more confident than the evidence supports and to form our beliefs and decisions on the basis of the evidence. It does not require us to give up on the ideas we love or believe in. It simply requires us to reconsider our viewpoint *when warranted*. Duncan Pritchard puts the point this way:

Intellectual humility . . . is entirely compatible with sticking to one's guns, even in the face of disagreement from those around you. Of course, it is not compatible with *always* sticking to one's guns in light of disagreement, as that would indeed be dogmatism. But in cases where one is *legitimately* confident of one's judgments—where one knows that one has special expertise or knowledge that those around one lacks, say, or where this is simply a topic that one knows one has put a due level of thought into—then having the conviction of one's opinions is entirely compatible with one not being dogmatically or intellectually arrogant.<sup>33</sup>

According to this sort of view, there is no essential tension between confidence in belief and intellectual humility. If we are attentive to the quality of the evidence on which our beliefs are based, and we are properly cognizant of our own limitations in obtaining and evaluating relevant information, then we may be both intellectually humble and have justified confidence in our views.<sup>34</sup>

Our question is whether people typically *are* justified in having much confidence in their political beliefs. We suggest that such confidence is often illegitimate. In particular, we will highlight two epistemic *defeaters* of political belief. These provide reasons to think one's political beliefs are unlikely to be true—or at least to be suspicious of one's ground for them. Assuming that intellectual humility increases a person's willingness and ability to revise a belief or reduce confidence in it when one learns of defeaters, it follows that intellectually humble people are more likely to have relatively low confidence in their political beliefs.

Consider two epistemic defeaters: *complexity* and *partisanship*. Starting with complexity, it is a truism that many, if not all, political issues are vastly epistemically complex.<sup>35</sup> Think of health care, nuclear disarmament, the economy, trade and tariffs, educational policy, international relations, social justice concerns,

32 Deffler Leary, and Hoyle, "Knowing What You Know"; and Krumrei-Mancuso and Rouse, "The Development and Validation of the Comprehensive Intellectual Humility Scale."

33 Pritchard, "Educating for Intellectual Humility and Conviction," 405 (emphasis added).

34 Indeed, our confidence is better justified than those who lack intellectual humility.

35 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*; Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*; and Friedman, *Power without Knowledge*.

taxation, and whatever other issues concern you. Obviously, the citizens of democratic societies tend to disagree very strongly about these issues. Consider disputes about the nature, causes, significance, and appropriate responses to global warming, drugs, poverty and inequality, terrorism, racism, the gender wage gap, criminal behavior, illicit immigration, and so on. All sorts of complex social and political factors influence each of these issues, making it reasonable for any ordinary citizen to have, at best, very little confidence in any belief about the best way to ameliorate them. These issues involve so many stakeholders and affect so many lives that any solution proposed to alleviate them ought to be met with doubt and extreme caution. In the face of such widespread complexity, what ought the intellectually humble person believe?

A truism in epistemology is that the strength of one's belief should derive in large part from the strength of one's epistemic position. If you lack good evidence for your belief, you should not be very confident in it. However, a key element of intellectual humility is an accurate assessment of one's epistemic standing and an ability to acknowledge gaps in one's knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the intellectually virtuous agent should have little conviction about these complex political topics, instead adopting a low credence or even suspending judgment about the best political decision.<sup>37</sup> While intellectual humility is perfectly compatible with having the courage of one's convictions where that is epistemically appropriate, it may rarely be epistemically appropriate to hold one's beliefs with confidence in the political domain. The complexity of the social world may frequently undermine justified confidence in pursuing one end or policy over another.

Epistemic complexity is not the only defeater of our political views. Another is what we might call *partisanship*. In a recent article, Hrishikesh Joshi points out that many people's political beliefs cluster around two main camps, despite the fact that these issues are rationally orthogonal.<sup>38</sup> In the United States, for example, the ordinary voter's views about abortion, climate change, immigration, gay marriage, minimum wage, gun control, affirmative action, and business regulation are strongly correlated. This raises an epistemic challenge for the politically

36 Tangney, "Humility."

37 Three caveats are needed. First, low confidence would not be required if the humble agent were also a genuine expert. The existence of expert peer disagreement, however, may still warrant a reduction in confidence. Second, a justified lack of confidence need not push one all the way to uncertainty or suspension of belief. But for highly complex issues, it will likely result in a significant reduction in confidence. Third, the intellectually humble are not always or necessarily less confident than those lacking humility. For instance, the intellectually timid are not humble and yet lack confidence in belief.

38 Joshi, "What Are the Chances You're Right about Everything?"

partisan. There is no compelling explanation for why one political side would get things reliably wrong with respect to a wide range of orthogonal issues.<sup>39</sup> Anyone who finds themselves having the beliefs that are typical of one of the clusters of political opinion therefore ought to reduce their confidence in these beliefs, since the fact of clustering provides an epistemic defeater of these beliefs. The orthogonality of these issues makes it likely that one's beliefs are the result of problematic irrelevant influences or a biased subset of evidence. Think of the ways that certain political identities, such as *being a Democrat* or *being a Republican*, tend to impose normative expectations about the positions one holds, independently of one's actual and perhaps highly particular convictions. This puts rational pressure on people to reduce their confidence in political propositions.<sup>40</sup>

Crucially, this epistemic challenge applies to *anyone* whose opinions tend to be clustered in this way. It is not just a problem for the intellectually humble. However, the intellectually humble are disposed to believe responsibly and to form largely accurate evaluations of their own epistemic standing. Indeed, if their intellectual humility is a self-conscious feature of their political and epistemic identity, then those dispositions will be especially important to them. As a result, they will tend to be less confident than unhumble individuals about these political issues.

A justified lack of confidence is not necessarily a bad thing. It is often useful to have insight into one's areas of ignorance, distinguishing what one knows from what one does not know. An intellectually humble individual is deliberative, careful to weigh evidence, and disposed to monitor whether they are jumping to conclusions that exceed the available evidence.<sup>41</sup> But these benefits of intellectual humility are perfectly compatible with the claim that intellectual humility fosters a (warranted) lack of confidence in one's political beliefs. In this regard, we may view it as a threat to political conviction. Moreover, intellectual humility may lead to other problematic consequences. As Joshi points out, strong partisanship may have practical benefits, including "promoting a sense of solidarity and community, facilitating engagement in long-term political projects and commitments, and helping to sustain motivation."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, there can be interpersonal costs to one's attempts to exercise intellectual humility about political issues; for example, an intellectually humble person might

39 Joshi, "What Are the Chances You're Right about Everything?" 43–48.

40 As Joshi writes, "the partisan has higher-order evidence that some of her first-order political beliefs are mistaken (or, alternatively, some of her credences are inaccurate)" ("What Are the Chances You're Right about Everything?" 50).

41 Deffler, Leary, and Hoyle, "Knowing What You Know"; and Leary et al., "Cognitive and Interpersonal Features of Intellectual Humility."

42 Joshi, "What Are the Chances You're Right about Everything?" 54.

note that the arguments of “their” side are weaker than they are being presented, which might provoke ire, or they may note that those on their side are self-servingly ignoring important counterevidence to some favored policy.

Beyond these philosophical worries, there is empirical evidence that intellectual humility moderates belief strength. In two studies, Adam Hodge and colleagues found that political humility was positively related to openness but negatively associated with political commitment.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Shauna Bowes and her team found that politics-specific intellectual humility is negatively associated with political belief strength and certainty.<sup>44</sup> This makes sense, given that intellectual humility moderates affective polarization and affective polarization is most pronounced in those who hold the strongest political beliefs.<sup>45</sup> Relatedly, previous research has shown that a strong theistic or nontheistic commitment is related to lower levels of intellectual humility.<sup>46</sup> In general, those who score low on intellectual humility tend to express greater certainty in their views than those who score higher.<sup>47</sup> However, the evidence in this area is mixed, and more research is needed.

## 5. HUMILITY AND QUIETISM

So far, we have discussed three ways in which intellectual humility could threaten one’s political convictions. In section 2, we examined the relationship between intellectual humility, exposure to diversity, and political apathy. In section 3, we looked at connections between intellectual humility, empathy, and loss of conviction. In section 4, we argued that intellectually humble citizens are better “epistemically calibrated,” but this may result in a justified lack of confidence. Importantly, none of these arguments presume that intellectual humility and political conviction are *necessarily* incompatible. We agree with defenders of the standard view that intellectual humility should not be equated with loss of conviction, apathy, or lack of ideological commitment. Nevertheless, there are reasonable grounds to doubt the optimistic view that intellectual

43 Hodge et al., “Political Humility”; and Hodge et al., “Political Humility and Forgiveness of a Political Hurt or Offense.”

44 Bowes et al., “Intellectual Humility and Between-Party Animus.” To assess political conviction, they asked participants to indicate “the strength of your political beliefs” on a sliding scale from 0 (not at all strong) to 100 (extremely strong). Hodge et al. (“Political Humility”) measured political commitment by the Ideological Obligation Questionnaire.

45 Bougher, “The Correlates of Discord.”

46 Hopkin, Hoyle, and Toner, “Intellectual Humility and Reactions to Opinions about Religious Beliefs.”

47 Leary et al., “Cognitive and Interpersonal Features of Intellectual Humility.”

humility is no threat to political conviction. We close by considering the possibility of forms of political engagement that express kinds of intellectual humility in ways that are *quietist*. One aspect of those forms of quietism is diminished willingness to participate in the kinds of energetic debate that are integral to modern democratic political *ethoi*.

Our main claim is that there are forms of intellectual humility that encourage attitudes and actions integral to forms of *political quietism*, which we understand as a certain *stance* on the political world. We take the idea of a “stance” from Bas van Fraassen, who characterizes it as a set of attitudes, commitments, approaches, and propositional attitudes, such as beliefs, wishes, and hopes.<sup>48</sup> We think there are also political stances. Think of the person with cooperative attitudes toward rivals, who is strongly committed to democratic government, values being epistemically well calibrated, displays empathetic understanding of others, and has a lucid sense of the epistemic complexity of modern political life.

Although this is only a sketch of this political stance, consider two features. First, there are clearly other stances that a person could adopt. Some are less committed to democratic governance, or they are committed for prudential or epistemic rather than principled reasons. Some people do not approach complexity with epistemically arduous exercises of circumspection and diligence. Some people do not place epistemic priority on being well calibrated; others might regard that aim as being in tension with other values, such as trust in inherited tradition or respect for religious authority. Some do not put value on empathy and might even see it as morally dangerous.<sup>49</sup> Some people are extremists or fanatics who abhor moderation, balance, and compromise.<sup>50</sup> All this has implications for how we understand and value the varieties of intellectual humility. If humility requires attitudes such as openness or fallibility, and if debating and empathizing with rivals is a source of humility, then we can appraise stances in terms of their conduciveness to forms of intellectual humility. So, although there is value in studying intellectual humility in isolation, we also need to understand different conceptions of humility within the wider stances a person takes on the political world.<sup>51</sup>

To see this, consider a stance of *political quietism*. It differs from the more active stance common to most contemporary scholars who write about

48 Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 47–48. For a discussion of stances as “epistemic policies,” see Teller, “What Is a Stance?”

49 Cassam, “The Epistemology of Terrorism and Radicalisation.”

50 On extremism, see Cassam, *Extremism*. On fanaticism, see Townsend et al., *The Philosophy of Fanaticism*.

51 Conceptions of intellectual humility can also be rooted in worldviews or metaphysical visions. See Cooper, *The Measure of Things*; and Kidd, “Deep Epistemic Vices.”

humility and political life, who typically value, *inter alia*, “engagement” and “participation,” debate, interaction with rivals, the expression and discussion of convictions, and ambitious styles of political activity directed toward substantive goals. Indeed, the value placed on such activist stances is a major reason for wanting to reconcile humility and conviction.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, being active in this sense—authentic, ambitious, engaged, committed, passionate—resonates with widespread tendencies within much of modern moral and social culture. However, there are alternative quietist stances with different conceptions of intellectual humility. We want to sketch out three general features of such a quietist stance, each interpretable as a form of intellectual humility. These features are *diffidence*, *reticence*, and *modesty*. Diffidence regulates the potential tensions between our political goals and our commitment to epistemic standards. Reticence concerns our interpersonal politico-epistemic behavior. Modesty is an active sensitivity to the complexity and changeability of the political world and the consequent difficulties of becoming and remaining properly informed and cognizant. Collectively, these features converge in kinds of *political quietist stance*, and to see why, it is worth sketching them more fully.

First, *diffidence*, in the sense of a principled commitment to reserve or cautiousness when it comes to taking on epistemically complex goals or commitments. For a diffident quietist, the epistemic costs of participation are highly salient, as are the high epistemic standards. Confronted with political events or decisions, a diffident quietist wants to do due epistemic diligence and so highlight the dull-sounding procedural epistemic virtues, such as assiduousness, carefulness, thoroughness, and other dispositions that align personal epistemic conduct with the ideal of *epistemic conscientiousness*.<sup>53</sup> If diffidence urges us to go slowly and work diligently, it is set against many of those tendencies that corrupt modern political culture, such as polarization and demonization of our rivals. Michael Oakeshott, for one, recommended diffidence as a means of resisting our tendencies to “attribute to our enemies a homogeneity which in fact they do not possess.”<sup>54</sup> In practice, then, a diffident quietist declines many opportunities to engage politically out of a keen recognition that they cannot properly perform due diligence, rather than out of apathy.

52 This is not the only reason, though. Ever since David Hume’s castigation of humility as a “monkish virtue,” three main criticisms of humility are that it requires ignorance, entails self-abnegation, and leads to paradoxical self-attributions (Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, 258). A classic statement is Julia Driver’s “The Virtues of Ignorance.”

53 On epistemic conscientiousness, see Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility*, 23.

54 Oakeshott, *What Is History?* 162. For similar claims about Oakeshott, see Craiutu, *Faces of Moderation*, ch. 5.



Second, *reticence*, a principled reluctance to debate complex issues due to the reticent quietist's appreciation of the enormous epistemic demands of preparing for and performing such debates.<sup>55</sup> A reticent quietist desires broad, deep understanding and is therefore highly resistant to underprepared participation in debates about complex, contentious, and important political topics. Practically, they may confine their discourse to some well-defined set of issues or will demand sufficient time to prepare for debate as a condition of participation. On other matters outside a well-defined area of confidence, they maintain principled silence—an attitude markedly different from those keen to chip in on whatever topics are “hot” or trending at that moment. Moreover, reticence is a guard against what David Hume called “enthusiasm,” the overactive energy that shows itself in those “excited by novelty” and “animated by opposition.”<sup>56</sup> Such reticence is consistent with voicing and defending positions but in a way set against the temptations to engage in lightning commentaries, “hot takes,” rapid judgments, “universal punditry,” and other failures of reticence.<sup>57</sup>

A third epistemic feature of political quietism is *modesty* about one's epistemic capacities to attain and maintain a sufficiently detailed, up-to-date, and critically tested knowledge and understanding of political issues. Oakeshott emphasizes the roles of slow, careful “initiation” into traditions of thought, reflection, and sensibility that affords us the capacities for “judgment.”<sup>58</sup> Modesty functions to remind us that it is difficult to remain sufficiently informed about a complicated changing world. Understanding is fragile and transient, liable to become outdated, constantly at risk of being undermined by new empirical or conceptual developments, and so on.<sup>59</sup> A modest quietist is alert to these possibilities and so is averse to epistemic overconfidence. Edmund Burke, for one, discerned overconfidence in the taste of many people for radical and rapid reforms of complex institutions and social “arrangements.” It is, he argued, very difficult to achieve a perspicacious understanding of the things one wants to reform: the effects of current arrangements are not always

55 See Smith, “On Diffidence” and “The Virtues of Unknowing.”

56 Hume, “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” 48.

57 On universal punditry, see Kitcher, *Science in a Democratic Society*, secs. 34 and 36. A reticent quietist will also honor Michel de Montaigne's advice to “soften and moderate” the typical “rashness” of our speech using qualifiers—such as “perhaps,” “I think,” “as far as I know” (Montaigne, *Essays*, 1165).

58 Oakeshott, “The Voice of Liberal Learning,” 59, 66.

59 This kind of epistemic modesty can be intensified by other dispositions, such as the cynical anticipation that social institutions often operate according to concealed aims and mechanisms, the identification of which requires new and demanding kinds of epistemic work. See Kidd, “Institutional Cynicism and Civic Virtue.”

obvious, and they may provide “remoter benefits” invisible to us, such that it is only with “infinite caution” that we should “venture upon pulling down” any complicated edifice.”<sup>60</sup>

A quietist stance, then, is characterized by a set of attitudes, commitments, and beliefs that include specific forms of diffidence, reticence, and modesty. Together, these inflect a different conception or style of intellectual humility that we see modeled by philosophical conservatives from Burke to Oakeshott. If this is right, there are other options for those who want to explore the relations of humility and politics. There are forms of political quietism that recommend more diffident and reticent styles of political life and engagement and that emphasize a more modest conception of the breadth and depth of understanding to which individual political agents could seriously aspire. In these politically quietist stances, there are different ways of operationalizing intellectual humility. Here, humility gets hooked into a set of attitudes, commitments, and beliefs that include diffidence and reticence, cautiousness and conscientiousness, acute suspicion of the temptations of subtle forms of overconfidence, and ardent resistance to what Oakeshott called “dauntlessness,” the enthusiasm for “plans that involve the transformation of the world” that are epistemically suspect because they are rooted in a “preoccupation with what is large and distant,” a tendency he regarded as “the intellectual vice against which we have to guard at the present time.”<sup>61</sup>

Whatever one thinks of these stances of political quietism, they offer alternative ways of thinking about how intellectual humility can relate to political life. For many people, a reticent and diffident stance on the world seems a compelling way of coping with the deeply complex and contested character of the social world and the polarized, pugnacious mood of political discourse. For others, such quietism may be pragmatically inadvisable and even deleterious. Some contemporary character epistemologists have argued that the normative status of character traits *as* virtuous or vicious may sometimes be dependent on the social location of the epistemic agent. José Medina uses the concept of a *predicament*, which is the whole dynamic structure of concerns, dangers, obstacles, and resources that structures a person’s experience of the social world.<sup>62</sup> One’s predicament can determine what sorts of character traits and stances are salient for a person in relation to the project of understanding and coping with the world. If so, the status of diffidence and reticence as virtues—or as

60 Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 152.

61 Oakeshott, *What Is History?* 161. For a similar sketch of a politically quietist figure, see McPherson, *The Virtues of Limits*, 120–21.

62 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*.

subvirtues in an intellectual humility cluster—might be contingent.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, that claim can even be extended to traits usually classified as vices; for example, it has been argued that the trait of closedmindedness can function as a virtue for members of marginalized groups living within epistemically hostile environments.<sup>64</sup> Our aim is not to adjudicate these different possibilities but rather to emphasize their existence and urge further study of them. There are other ways to think about how intellectual humility may relate to political conviction, for instance, some of which can inform political stances that have a more quietist character. Exploring such alternative possibilities gives us a richer overview of the connections between the varieties of intellectual humility and the many forms of political conviction.<sup>65</sup>

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63 See Dillon, “Critical Character Theory”; and Kidd, “Epistemic Corruption and Social Oppression” and “From Vice Epistemology to Critical Character Epistemology.”

64 Battaly, “Can Closed-Mindedness Be an Intellectual Virtue?”

65 We are grateful for the constructive and probing comments of two anonymous referees.

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