




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Intellectual humility and Christian faith

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Abstract

Christians talk a lot about humility. They also talk a lot about the kinds of radical faith that seem to fly in the face of intellectual humility. I explore how best to resolve this tension, from a Christian perspective. I argue that rather than prohibiting radical, ‘all-in’ faith or giving up on an intellectual humility requirement, Christians should conceive of intellectual humility as rooted in (non-)concern for one’s intellectual ego. This kind of intellectual humility is compatible with radical faith, but it also suggests a critique of some actual, ego-driven faith commitments.

Keywords: intellectual humility; Christian faith

Introduction

Humility is a centrally important Christian virtue. Famously, Christianity casts pride as the root of all evil, the downfall of the devil himself. Jesus himself claims humility and exhorts his followers to adopt lowly, servant roles, following in his humble footsteps. And interpreters of the tradition from the apostle Paul to Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis are all resoundingly clear that Christians must ‘clothe’ themselves with humility (Colossians 3:12).¹

But *intellectual* humility (IH) – roughly, humility specifically in one’s intellectual life, often marked by an awareness of one’s fallibility and a willingness to learn from others? It seems less clear, initially, whether Christians as such are similarly committed to the importance of IH.

On the one hand, Christians do seem distinctively committed to IH. Christianity affirms the existence of a transcendent reality, beyond our grasp. God’s ways are beyond our ways, God’s thoughts beyond our thoughts. Moreover, Christianity affirms the ‘fallen’ status of humankind; we are quite limited in our abilities to appreciate the world we live in, as finite and fallen humans. One sees this emphasis particularly clearly, for example, in the apophatic traditions.

Christianity also requires a strongly anti-individualistic epistemology, and one might think that an opposition to individualism would go hand-in-hand with IH. Whereas the intellectually arrogant person might be tempted to try to ‘go it alone’ on religious questions, figuring out what to believe by the use of pure reason or a firsthand examination of the evidence, the Christian must rely on biblical eyewitnesses, scribes, canonisers, and/or

Church authorities. Even where a Christian has a kind of firsthand insight via religious experience, such experience can be opaque to reason and resistant to communication to others – not exactly the most socially respectable means of belief formation. Christians, as such, tend to form beliefs in ways that look ‘foolish’ to the ‘world’, and perhaps this acceptance of social foolishness is a manifestation of IH.

On the other hand, Christians seem to be invited or called to hold the core tenets of Christianity – for example, that God exists, that God is triune, that Jesus is both divine and human, that Jesus’s death on the cross can save us, and so on – with a tenacity that is, *prima facie*, in tension with intellectual humility. I want to highlight three aspects of the kind of tenacious commitment or faith that I have in mind. Christians seem to be invited to, for example:

- Display markers of extremely high confidence in Christian teaching, including radical action² (e.g., martyrdom) but also *affective* states premised on high confidence in the gospel, including freedom from anxiety (1 Peter 5:7), peace (John 16:33; 2 Peter 1:2), joy (John 15:11), and ‘abundant life’ (John 10:10).
- Hold firm to belief in Christ – even in the face of contrary, ‘deceitful’ evidence.³ (‘So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you’ (2 Thessalonians 2:15).)
- Boldly share the good news of Christ with others, converting those who initially disagree. (The Great Commission is not to go and learn respectfully from all the other religious traditions of the world, contributing your own experiences while acknowledging that you are fallible; it’s to go and ‘make disciples of all nations, baptising them’ (Matthew 28:19).)

I’m not trying to cherry-pick bits of the tradition here, and I’ll spend some time in a later section with the question of what Christianity really invites or calls its adherents to do. But it certainly seems as though the tradition permits or even encourages Christians to ‘go beyond’ their evidence in having exorbitantly high confidence in some highly contestable metaphysical and moral claims about the universe (exhibiting what I’ll call *synchronic evidential surpassing*); to close off openness to further evidence that might lead them away from Christianity (exhibiting what I’ll call *diachronic evidential resistance*);⁴ and, finally, to treat the religious views of others, insofar as they diverge from Christian teaching, as to-be-changed rather than to-be-learned-from (exhibiting what I’ll call *interpersonal closedness*). Call faith that exhibits a significant degree of synchronic evidential surpassing, diachronic evidential resistance, and/or interpersonal closedness, *all-in faith*.⁵

In contrast, intuitive, paradigmatic expressions of IH include having only the level of confidence in one’s views supported by the evidence, hence (typically) a rather temperate or moderate level of confidence in contestable propositions on which there is great disagreement;⁶ awareness of one’s fallibility and intellectual limitations resulting in openness to evidence contradicting one’s beliefs (see, e.g., Whitcomb et al. (2017) and Porter et al. (2022)); and respect for the views of others, including listening charitably and with openness to what someone else might have to teach you.⁷ In saying these are ‘intuitive’ paradigmatic expressions, I’m understating the case. These are the very behaviours and attitudes that psychologists cite in their scales for measuring IH.⁸ For ease of reference, let’s call these, respectively, *synchronic evidential responsiveness* (having only the level of confidence in a belief warranted by one’s evidence); *diachronic evidential responsiveness* (being open and responsive to new evidence that might change one’s views); and *interpersonal openness* (seeing the views of others as potentially informative for one’s own). Christians seem to be called to manifest the very opposite of typical expressions of IH, when it comes to core Christian teaching.

We have here the makings of a puzzle, which the first aim of this article is to articulate clearly.⁹ I'll call it the faith/humility puzzle for Christianity, or just the faith/humility puzzle. Now, as I'll argue in the conclusion of the article, there are related puzzles that have nothing to do with Christianity. But here I'll articulate the puzzle specifically with reference to Christian teaching, in order to highlight the philosophical and theological consequences for Christians of resolving this puzzle in different ways. I think that the distinctive Christian call to humility makes this puzzle especially challenging.

The puzzle consists of the following three claims, each of which seem plausible but which are jointly in tension:

1. Christians ought to be intellectually humble about core Christian claims.
2. Christians are invited or at least permitted to have all-in faith.
3. All-in faith is incompatible with intellectual humility about core Christian claims.

The second aim of this article is to argue that this puzzle is not easy to resolve. Note, first, that we cannot just say the obligation to be intellectually humble posited in claim 1 trumps or overrides the permission posited in claim 2 – that is, we can't say this without also denying claim 2. This is because the kind of normativity at issue in both claims 1 and 2 is the same: both claims address how Christians, as such, may or ought to live (more on which presently). And if Christians as such are obligated not to have all-in faith, then there's no good sense in which Christians as such are permitted or invited to have all-in faith.¹⁰ Below I will consider this option of denying claim 2, that is to say, denying the claim that Christians as such really may have all-in faith. I'll suggest that this option, like some other possible ways of resolving the puzzle, has significant costs. Ultimately I will argue that claim 3 is false – but instructively so, in ways that should inform our understanding of IH and the kind of faithful life to which Christians are called.

I'll begin, over the next three sections, by considering alternative ways of resolving the tension and highlighting their costs. The upshot of these sections will be that defenders of Christianity should be highly motivated to find a way of reconciling IH and all-in faith. I go on to argue that this is possible – but only if we go in for a particular ego-concern-based kind of philosophical view of IH.¹¹ *Inter alia*, then, I will be arguing on behalf of ego-concern-based views of IH.

Two notes of clarification are in order before proceeding. First, I'll refer throughout to Christian teaching or core Christian claims, ignoring disagreements among Christians and leaving those terms deliberately vague. I have in mind either the most truly Christian version of the claims of Christianity (whether or not that corresponds to anything written in a creed or statement of faith), or roughly the intersection of things that various Christian groups believe (or perhaps some middle ground – the intersection of things that some more genuine subset of Christian groups believe). An example is the claim that Jesus Christ is the son of God and second person of the trinity.

Second, the talk of what Christians as such are allowed or required to do is meant to invoke a distinctly Christian notion of permission and obligation. When claim 1 says that Christians ought to be intellectually humble, the claim is that such an obligation comes from the religious tradition itself. Something like: by the lights of Christianity, intellectual humility is required. And when claim 2 says that Christians are permitted to have all-in faith, the claim is that by the lights of Christianity, there is no obligation not to have all-in faith. We will not have time here to consider the general relationship between religious obligations and other normative obligations (whether ethical, prudential, or epistemic). But tacitly I am thinking of what Christians as such are obliged to do as a rather distinct category from what all people are obliged to do. Christians as such are obliged to go to church, to give to the poor, and to pray, for example. Christians as such

are not obliged to brush their teeth, to avoid the gambler's fallacy in their reasoning, or – perhaps – to be on time for meetings; though presumably Christian people also ought to do all of those things, for the same reasons that non-Christian people ought to do them.

A normative dilemma for Christians?

One way of dealing with the tension in the faith/humility puzzle would be to decide that this is just a tension Christians are called to live with; perhaps Christians, as such, face a *normative dilemma*, involving IH on one hand and all-in faith on the other.¹²

According to this line of thinking, all claims in the puzzle could be true. That is, perhaps there really is something important about being intellectually humble when it comes to core Christian claims: Christians really are required to display such humility. And yet perhaps there is also something good and valuable about all-in faith, such that Christians really may, in some sense, have that kind of faith. All this despite the fact that one really can't have both all-in faith and intellectual humility about core Christian claims.

How should we make sense of this proposal? We can look to the ethics literature, where some defend the existence of genuine moral dilemmas. A genuine moral dilemma is a case in which an agent is morally required to do each of multiple actions, the agent cannot do all of the actions (though she can do each of them individually), and it is not true that one of the relevant requirements to act overrides the others (Sinnott-Armstrong 1987, 265–266). One particularly striking example comes from William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* (1980), in which Nazis force Sophie to choose which of her two children will be killed and which spared in a concentration camp. Sophie cannot innocently avoid the choice by choosing neither, since if she refuses to choose the Nazis will kill both her children.

Now the case of all-in faith and IH about core Christian claims is different. For one thing, in the faith/humility puzzle we have not two conflicting requirements but a requirement (to be intellectually humble about core Christian claims) that clashes with a permission or invitation (to have all-in faith). This certainly looks like a structure where the IH requirement would simply override the all-in faith invitation, dissolving any appearance of a dilemma. To see this as a genuine dilemma, then, perhaps we need to recast claim 2 as a requirement: perhaps we have to claim that Christians are required to have all-in faith.

Such a claim would be dubious on theological grounds; the tradition seems to have patience for those of us who doubt, waver, or insist on seeing the evidence. This is the first issue for this solution to the faith/humility puzzle.

The second issue is that even if there are genuine moral dilemmas, it is highly doubtful that there could be 'genuine religious dilemmas'. Zagzebski (1989), in commenting on the possibility of moral dilemmas arising from divine commands, asks rhetorically, '[I]sn't it unreasonable to say that any one part or aspect of God's goodness can be in conflict with any other?' (14, see also Adams (1999), 283). It is one thing to think agents are sometimes doomed to violate a normative requirement: life can be complicated, and lots of stuff seems to matter in different ways. It is quite another thing for the Christian to think that God has doomed Christians to fail normative requirements coming from within the Christian tradition.

Relatedly, while genuine normative dilemmas seem most plausible as diagnoses of extreme, confusing, or difficult situations that can arise in the margins of the moral life, the tension between all-in faith and IH for the Christian does not arise in rare circumstances; it is not fringy. Christians are called to exemplify both humility and faith pervasively in their lives. And when Christians are praised or taken as exemplars, they are

often taken as exemplars of both. I conclude that we should not class the faith/humility puzzle with baffling cases in which one regrettably has to choose among forbidden options.

Deny a requirement to be intellectually humble about core Christian claims

A different and perhaps more promising way out of the puzzle would be to deny claim 1, the idea that Christians really are required to be intellectually humble about core Christian claims. In support of this claim, I offer the following positive argument:

- i. Christians ought to be humble.
- ii. If Christians ought to be humble, then they ought also to be intellectually humble.
- iii. If Christians ought (in general) to be intellectually humble, then they ought also to be intellectually humble about core Christian claims. (In other words, there is no principled exception to the injunction to be intellectually humble, when it comes to core Christian claims.)

Therefore, Christians ought to have intellectual humility about core Christian claims (claim 1 in our faith/humility puzzle).

The contestable premises here are (ii) and (iii). (i) seems rock solid, theologically.

Premise (ii) links the normative status of IH to the normative status of humility in general. This seems appropriate, first, because IH is plausibly an aspect of general humility. A person who was humble in many areas of life – humble about their basketball skills, their importance as a father, and in their community – would strike us as rather less humble if they lacked IH when it came to many of their beliefs and views – if, e.g., they were always cocksure in their opinions, unmoved by countervailing evidence, and dismissive toward the views of others.

Moreover, even if IH isn't exactly an aspect of humility, it would certainly seem to inherit part of the value of humility. Explanations of the value of humility typically appeal to the reality of human limitations, or the value of respectful relationships, or the disvalue of an encroaching ego. These are reasons why humility is appropriate and beneficial for humans. But these explanations all extend neatly to explain why IH would also be valuable or, indeed, required. We are intellectually limited: fallible, prone to bias and memory failure. It is good for our relationships to be marked by specifically intellectual respect and dependence. And our egos can distort our thinking as well as our other endeavours. Regardless of exactly how we think of intellectual humility and humility in general, it seems that any plausible view will link their normative statuses. Premise (ii) stands.

What about premise (iii), the claim that there is no principled exception for the core claims of Christianity? There are admittedly a few reasons one might doubt this premise.

For one thing, you might subscribe to an epistemological view on which people are entitled to be 'immodest' or dogmatic about some fundamental epistemic stuff. Lewis (1971) famously argued that we should only use methods of reasoning that 'immodestly' recommend themselves, and recent authors have extended this point to cover not just 'inductive methods' but also Bayesian ur-priors and sets of epistemic standards (cf. Horowitz 2014, Greco and Hedden 2016, and Schoenfield 2014). The intuitive idea in the background of these arguments is that one can't coherently question everything. We hold some beliefs fixed in order to enquire into others.¹³ Perhaps we are therefore entitled to hold fixed certain fundamental beliefs, without worrying about intellectual humility. And perhaps a belief in the core claims of Christianity deserves to be exempted from an IH requirement, precisely because it is one of these basic worldview beliefs.

I'll highlight two problems with this suggestion. First, even if we accept that people are entitled to be dogmatic about some of their fundamental epistemic commitments – perhaps, the belief that there is an external world, or the propriety of conceptualising in terms of 'green' rather than 'grue' (Titelbaum 2010), or some basic rules of logic or methods of reasoning – commitment to core Christian claims is far more robust, contentious, and empirically grounded. We don't just 'come online' as epistemic agents finding it blindingly obvious that Jesus is fully God and fully human. We must be told this and exposed to at least some reasons, broadly construed, to believe this is the case. Christian belief isn't a good candidate, then, for being totally epistemologically fundamental. And core claims of Christian teaching are a far cry from the paradigmatic kinds of beliefs and commitments that many philosophers defend as properly dogmatic or immodest.¹⁴

Second, claiming beliefs as indubitable, fundamental starting points has commonly led people astray. Judging from intra-Christian disagreements, some Christians must clearly be making mistakes in identifying which commitments are fundamental or core to the Christian faith.

Here's a different way of doubting premise (iii). You might say that since the point of Christian (intellectual) humility is enabling a relationship with God, we cannot be required to be (intellectually) humble in ways that would threaten or hamper that relationship. We would undermine the telos of virtue of humility by applying IH to the very beliefs that prompt and direct our attempt to love God.¹⁵

I doubt, however, that the Christian call to humility is conditioned on effects in quite that way. We are not supposed to be looking around carefully before practising humility (or charity, or generosity, etc.), to make sure that we won't accidentally harm our prospects for relating to God. Moreover, note that a relationship with God can also be hampered by a misidentification or misunderstanding of core Christian claims. Intellectual arrogance or dogmatism about (what one takes to be) core Christian claims seems at least as risky as humility, if what we ultimately care about is the right relationship to God.

I conclude, then, that Christians really are required to be intellectually humble, as part of their general call to be humble, and there's no principled exception to be made for core Christian claims.

Deny that Christians are invited to have all-in faith

Perhaps instead some will want to question whether Christians really are called to the kind of all-in faith I sketched in the introduction. May Christians really eschew synchronic evidential responsiveness with respect to their Christian beliefs? Are they permitted, by the lights of Christianity, to display diachronic evidential resistance and to close themselves off from learning from others' opposing views?

There are certainly strong arguments suggesting that faith needn't involve a high degree of confidence or even belief; non-doxastic views of faith are seemingly compatible with synchronic evidential responsiveness.¹⁶ But such views often still maintain that faith involves diachronic evidential resistance of some strength or other. For example, Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2021) and Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2022) include a resilience condition in their definition of faith; they claim the person of faith relies on God in certain ways and, to some degree, resists challenges to their continuing to do so. In a similar vein Buchak (2012) casts faith as terminating one's search for further evidence. While the faithful person may happen to encounter new evidence bearing on Christian teaching, she is not exactly open to new evidence – not in the same way the non-faithful person is. It seems, then, that even some non-doxastic views of faith may, depending on the details, cast faith as necessarily resistant to evidence in a way that makes trouble for the prima facie compatibility of faith and IH.

But even if we reject the view that all faith, as such, must be robustly synchronically and/or diachronically evidence-non-responsive, we should accept claim 2; that is, we should accept that significantly evidence-nonresponsive, all-in faith is *one* permitted form of Christian faith. Here's claim 2, verbatim: 'Christians are invited or at least permitted to have all-in faith.' This is not the claim that all-in faith is the only good, real, or 'saving' kind of faith. Just that it is a good, permissible, or appropriate form of faith. The claim is that being all-in on Christian teaching – in ways marked by synchronic evidential surpassing, diachronic evidential resistance, and interpersonal closedness – is a thing that Christianity licenses or permits.

This seems to me exceedingly difficult to deny. Where do we see Christians or disciples criticised in the Bible for being too quick to believe in Jesus, too steadfast in their faith, or too zealous in their (non-heretical) preaching and teaching? I don't see it. I don't see the Bible or Christian tradition worried about believers being too gullible, rash, settled, or effusive *in their right Christian beliefs*. A believer who enjoys total confidence in Jesus's identity as saviour, who is loyal to Christianity, and who shares the good news with boldness is certainly not sanctioned by the lights of Christian teaching or tradition; she is arguably an ideal by those lights.

Even critics of what I am calling all-in faith often characterise it in ways that seem to reinforce its good standing within the Christian tradition. Howard-snyder and Mckaughan (2021) distinguish their preferred form of faith, 'Markan faith', from a different kind of faith which, they submit, conflicts with intellectual humility because it requires certain or confident belief on the basis of inadequate evidence. But though they criticise this view of faith, they trace it to (famously non-heretical) Thomas Aquinas and claim that 'Thomistic' views of faith remain popular among both Christians and non-Christians, academics and non-academics. Howard-Snyder and McKaughan claim that Thomistic faith is in tension with IH, which seems plausible enough. But it would seem highly implausible to go further and claim that all Thomistic faith is impermissible by the lights of Christianity.

Now one might respond: sure, total, and committed confidence in Christian claims is an ideal for Christians, but *only* where one's confidence is completely rationalised by one's fabulous epistemic position. That is, only where one does not engage in dodgy forms of synchronic evidential surpassing or diachronic evidential resistance, because one does not need to do so.

Consider the claim that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that I live in South Bend, Indiana. I have high and indeed perhaps resilient confidence in these claims, but only because I have such fantastic evidence that they are true that I can reasonably dismiss countervailing evidence. Perhaps the only appropriate all-in faith is like this – all-in faith is appropriate for believers who have access to the truths of Christianity through the revelation of God. What better epistemic source could one want, to rationalise resilient confidence? And if Christian believers really do have reliable access to God's truth, via the Holy Spirit, then perhaps they are neither invited nor permitted to commit themselves to Christianity in ways that go beyond their evidence or epistemic reasons.

There are three reasons I think this argument fails. First, some influential strains of the Christian tradition specifically emphasise the value of faith that goes beyond what one has epistemic reason to affirm (Kierkegaard 1941 [1846], James 1898, Evans 1998, and Bishop 2007). The idea that, instead, the only permissible kind of confident, resilient faith involves eminently well-grounded and epistemically reasonable belief is theologically controversial.¹⁷

Second, there are a wide variety of paths to Christian belief, marked by different kinds of epistemic sources and varying degrees of epistemic quality (reflecting different degrees, perhaps, of influence by the Holy Spirit). Some of us Christians enjoy direct awareness

of the presence of God, through various kinds of mystical or religious experience. Some don't. Some of us are raised in churches with robust theological traditions and catechised according to an orthodoxy. Some of us are raised in churches with little institutional oversight, looking directly to the Bible to tease out God's message as laypeople. Some of us are taught the Christian faith by modern-day saints and scholars. Some of us are taught the Christian faith by (otherwise) ignorant, lying, swindling, phonies. Some of us are taught moral egalitarianism, fascism, communism, capitalism, or complementarianism about the sexes as part of our Christian education. And when it comes to the identity and content of the core tenets of Christianity, there is incompatible divergence among (self-described) Christians.

It is therefore not plausible to say that all Christians have excellent epistemic grounds for their beliefs in core Christian claims. Is it plausible to say that all Christians *who are permitted to have all-in faith* have excellent epistemic grounds? I think still the answer is no. Recall that 'permission' here is permission according to Christianity, not epistemic or moral permission per se. Our earlier remarks then would seem to apply again: the Christian tradition's celebration of confident and resilient, non-heretical Christian belief and teaching is not carefully hedged by caveats about the quality of believers' evidence or the propriety of their paths to faith. The Christian position seems to be that all-in faith is a fine (if not fabulous!) thing so long as one gets the gospel right. Moreover, it runs counter to the radical inclusivity of the gospel to say that highly epistemically vulnerable, fallible people with less than stellar epistemic paths to Christ are excluded from the call to have all-in faith and thus to enjoy abundant life unmarked by mindfulness of the possibility that they are mistaken. The invitation to confident, resilient faith does not seem limited to a chosen few who were able to take the right path to Christian belief.

Finally, even those chosen few with excellent epistemic credentials are going to need to engage in some synchronic evidential surpassing, diachronic evidential resistance, and interpersonal closeness if they are going to enjoy a fixed confidence in Christ. This is because having an in-fact excellent or reliable source for a belief is not sufficient to license one to maintain that one's belief is correct or justified in the face of all challenges, and Christian beliefs are so controversial. Many, many people take themselves to be guided by excellent sources (trusted community leaders, the light of reason, a revealed tradition, personal religious experience, the Holy Spirit) in believing incompatible things. Even the ones who are in fact correct have to go out on a limb, as it were, in maintaining their correctness. If we deny a Christian invitation to be all-in, it seems even those chosen few will need to be less than settled in their Christian convictions.

I conclude that giving up claim 2 would require a very strained theological understanding of the kinds of faithful life Christians are invited or permitted to pursue and enjoy. This is so even if some people do have great evidence or epistemic reasons to believe Christian teachings.

Questioning what IH requires

Given this, we have one remaining option for solving the faith/humility puzzle. We must turn a critical eye to claim 3, which says:

All-in faith is incompatible with intellectual humility about core Christian claims.

This claim looked plausible initially because, as we reviewed in the introduction, all-in faith seems essentially to be constituted by intellectual practices (like synchronic evidential surpassing, diachronic evidential resistance, and interpersonal closedness)

that are incompatible with paradigmatic expressions of IH (i.e., synchronic evidential responsiveness, diachronic evidential responsiveness, and interpersonal openness) when it comes to the core claims of Christianity.¹⁸

To deny claim 3, then, I suggest we need to find some daylight between characteristic expressions of IH, on the one hand, and the virtue of IH on the other. In general, there is theoretical reason to separate paradigmatic expressions of virtues (such as the paradigmatically generous charitable gift) from their underlying virtue-states, which often include broad dispositions, emotions, and concerns (such as generous dispositions to non-selfish benevolence). Generous people aren't always going around engaging in charitable gifts and may in some snapshot of time or some area of their lives even appear to be stingy by *failing* to give or giving little (because they have reasons for focusing their giving elsewhere, or because they see that more lavish giving would actually not further the good of the recipient, etc.). So we might hope that a similar move in the present case could illuminate how IH – the virtue – really is compatible with all-in faith, despite appearances.

However, this compatibility should not come too easily. We still want an account of IH that explains why it is *typically* in tension with evidential surpassing, diachronic evidential resistance, and interpersonal closedness. The Christian looking to solve the faith/humility puzzle (and unimpressed by the options surveyed thus far) should want an account of IH that is both permissive of some all-in faith and plausible – hence generally tending to manifest itself in most areas of thought as synchronic evidential responsiveness, diachronic evidential responsiveness, and interpersonal openness.

I'll begin, in the remainder of this section, by reviewing three recent, influential views that seem to me not to fit this bill, before turning in the next section to a promising family of alternatives. Take first what I'll call the *doxastic account of IH*, first sketched in Hazlett (2012), according to which IH involves the disposition to take up appropriate higher-order attitudes toward one's beliefs – for example, the belief that one's degree of justification is only moderately strong, or a higher-order suspension of judgement about whether some first order belief is reasonable. On this view IH is a matter of being disposed, on a reflective level, to accurate assessments of how justified or reasonable one's first order beliefs really are. Hazlett's view was specifically designed to allow agents who encounter peer disagreement to (sometimes) retain their ingoing, first-order views while still counting as intellectually humble. Encountering a disagreeing peer may require us, in the name of intellectual humility, to give up the reflective belief that our position is (more) reasonable, or that our belief constitutes knowledge, according to Hazlett. But intellectual humility doesn't itself call for us to revise our first order views.

Dormandy (2018) notes that this sort of IH seems available to even the most 'dogmatic' religious believer – as I might put it, even the Christian with all-in faith. Because even people with all-in faith can have the higher-order belief that their beliefs in Christian teaching are less-than-perfectly justified. Or at least they can lack the higher-order belief that their beliefs are perfectly well justified. After all, one's higher-order beliefs are compatible – logically, if not rationally¹⁹ – with a commitment to stick to one's first-order Christian beliefs come what may. So here we have a way of thinking about IH that makes it compatible with all-in faith.

The problem is that this account makes IH seem too easy or thin; dispositions to appropriate reflective attitudes are not sufficient for IH.²⁰ True IH should be harder to come by than a higher-order belief that may or may not impact your intellectual (or other) behaviour. And we would not count, for example, the committed flat earther as intellectually humble merely because she could occasionally admit, in a reflective mood, the possibility that she is in error. So despite the compatibility of doxastic IH and all-in faith, it seems to me the Christian should not embrace a doxastic view in order to solve the

faith/humility puzzle. Indeed, this thin account may seem distinctly out of step with the central importance Christianity attributes to humility and, by extension, IH.

Other contemporary views of IH, though, present us the different problem of not casting IH as a virtue compatible with genuinely all-in faith. Take the limitations-owning account, which was developed by Whitcomb et al. (2017) and has been widely influential in philosophy and psychology. According to the limitations-owning view, IH consists in appropriately attending to one's intellectual limitations (such as, e.g., 'gaps in knowledge', 'deficits in learnable skills', and 'intellectual character flaws' (p. 516)) and owning them – including, for example, believing that one really has them, trying to manage or mitigate them, and feeling, for example, 'regret or dismay' about them (p. 519). The limitations-owning view specifies that virtuous limitations-owning must be well-motivated – by the pursuit of epistemic goods – and must be moderate or appropriate, achieving an Aristotelian mean between intellectual servility and intellectual arrogance.

Is such virtuous limitations-owning when it comes to one's religious beliefs compatible with all-in faith? It seems not.²¹ The person with all-in faith surely has significant cognitive limitations relevant to forming true religious beliefs. She surely is subject to various biases, lacks some evidence one would really like to have for God's existence, and fails to answer in a fully satisfactory way some of the more significant challenges to Christian belief (e.g., the problem of evil). So, given that she is significantly epistemically limited,²² the limitations-owning account seems to suggest that IH for her will involve significant limitations-owning.

But if she has all-in faith, she cannot be attending to those limitations and owning them in any significant way. For she must be relatively unconcerned with the question of whether she has gotten things wrong or made a mistake in her assessment of the epistemic value of Christian teaching; for her, as a person with all-in faith, this question is settled and not to be re-opened (at least, apart from exceptional circumstances). The person with all-in faith, as such, does not investigate and attend to possible sources of error in her core religious beliefs, trying to notice and manage her own fallible tendencies; she does not fret, feeling regret or dismay over her own proneness to error. And she does not seek to transcend her individual limitations by looking to learn from differently minded others; she maintains a posture of interpersonal closedness. On the limitations-owning account, she simply lacks IH.²³

Similar remarks apply to Kidd's (2016) account of IH, as a disposition to regulate one's intellectual conduct in response to recognising how well one fulfils various confidence conditions, that is, the conditions under which one is entitled to confidence, potentially to include, for example, having certain cognitive capacities or being embedded in a reliable community. The disposition to regulate one's intellectual conduct in response to changes in how well-placed one is to judge on the question of Christian teaching, seems in tension with the diachronic (and indeed, synchronic) evidential resistance involved in all-in faith.

In this section we began the search for a plausible account of the virtue of IH on which IH about Christian teaching is compatible with Christian faith, finding a few of the leading contemporary options wanting. I'll present my last and best shot at this in the next section.

IH and the ego

I think the most promising accounts of IH – promising, that is, with respect to permitting some all-in faith while explaining why IH typically manifests as synchronic evidential responsiveness, and so on – locate the essence of IH in a person's concern for their intellectual ego. There are two flavours of this kind of account on the contemporary market.

First, according to the *low concern account* developed by Roberts and Wood (2007), the person with IH, as such, has a relatively low degree of concern for things like intellectual status and importance.²⁴ She cares a bit, but not very much, that her ideas are respected

and credited to her. She cares a bit, but not very much, about how her beliefs redound to her own credit and worth as a person. Mostly, after all, she just cares about whether her beliefs are true.

Second, according to the *no-distraction account* developed by Callahan (2022, 2024), the person with IH, as such, is disposed to be free from prideful distraction by her ego, in her thinking. Whereas the person suffering from vicious pride is routinely distracted in her efforts to evaluate evidence or engage in epistemically productive conversation, frequently getting caught up in how her beliefs reflect on her or what others think about her intellect, the person with IH is relatively better able to focus on the questions and ideas at hand. The person with IH doesn't trip over her own ego and start worrying about how new arguments or claims or batches of evidence reflect on herself (by reflecting on her prior beliefs). Her thinking isn't distorted by a concern to come out looking good in a conversation, and she doesn't have a background hum of such concern nagging at her from the back of her mind when she tries to think and reason about a question. Unless prideful concern for ego is genuinely useful and appropriate, given the context of an enquiry,²⁵ the person with IH will be free of it on this account.

Now, I can't properly defend either of these accounts here. In support of their general, disjunctive plausibility, I'll just note that despite being somewhat revisionary these accounts do suggest a connection between intuitive, paradigmatic expressions of IH and the virtue of IH (conceived as a matter of ego-concern). When people are not overly concerned to come out right or vindicate their own reasoning or intellectual importance, they are more likely to have tempered confidence in contested views. They are typically able to notice and appreciate new evidence because they are not fiercely loyal to their own positions as such. And because they are not caught up in their own egos they are better able to genuinely listen to other people. So these accounts do suggest why, in general, the person with IH will tend to reason in ways that are synchronically and diachronically evidence-responsive and will tend to be interpersonally open, relative to the person lacking in IH.

Yet these accounts also can admit the compatibility of IH and all-in faith. It is *possible* to be highly confident in Christian teaching, including being resistant to counterevidence and having a closed posture toward non-Christian people (about the gospel), without having a high or distracting level of concern for one's ego. This is because things other than concern for one's ego can motivate those aspects of all-in faith. For example, a pure love of Christ, or hope in Christ, or trust in one's Christian community might motivate one's all-in faith commitments. If a person's motivation for all-in faith bottoms out in trust in Jesus Christ, or hope in the Christian message, or really anything other than a concern that she turn out to have been right, then all-in faith will be compatible with IH on these views. Anti-egoistic accounts of IH are cleanly compatible with all-in faith, in principle, because they require only (the absence of) a certain kind of motivation or desire, driving one's faith commitments. Thus these views make IH potentially compatible with unqualified, all-in faith for real Christian people (i.e., not just the blessed among us with extraordinary access to God's truth).

So ego concern accounts admit the possibility of all-in faith for the intellectually humble person, while also suggesting a link between IH and its paradigmatic expressions. Still, we might wonder if these accounts suggest enough of a link. Do they, like the doxastic account of IH, make IH look too easy or let all-in faith off the hook too easily?

I think not. These accounts seem to suggest an important tension between many actual cases of all-in faith and IH. For much as Christians may blanch to admit it, egoistic motivations do seem to infect the tenacity of many faith commitments.

The Christian academic who has a prominent place in her church and who has staked much of her reputation on her ability to defend her faith respectably, may be very

distracted by her ego when she, for example, listens to an agnostic friend explain reasonable misgivings about the existence of God. Her diachronic resistance or interpersonal closedness might come largely from wanting to continue to see herself (and be seen) as a wise and right-thinking Christian. The zealous missionary may also be ego-driven – wanting to save souls, yes, but also wanting personally to *win* – to win arguments, or to win hearts and minds, chalked up to her own account as it were. And even the would-be martyr, acting on what would seem to be extreme synchronic confidence in God’s existence, may be tempted to ratchet up her confidence in Christianity out of some ego-driven attachment to having been right in the end – or at least having been noble, loyal, or otherwise impressive.

None of this is meant to deny the personal and professional costs of being Christian, or the ways in which being a Christian can require one to give up status in society. But I think that, in some salient contexts (including some corners of Anglophone academia), it is also possible to derive a great deal of personal and professional importance and esteem from being a specifically Christian philosopher. And I worry that this is a temptation, to allow concern for ego – the desire to be right, to see our team come out right, because we want to have *been the ones who were right* – to infect even our own attitudes toward core Christian claims. The invitation to all-in faith is made under a charge, to the Christian, to be free of (powerful or distracting) egoistic motivations, in the name of (intellectual) humility. And this does meaningfully and substantially constrain the kinds of all-in faith that can be celebrated in and by Christianity. Another way of putting this might be that the appearance of tension between IH and all-in faith is more than a mere appearance; there is a real tension between having all-in faith and having IH in that the former is too often infected by vicious intellectual pride. Christians must be on their guard.

Stepping back, I am suggesting that claim 3 is false; the solution to the faith/humility puzzle for Christianity is to reject the claim that all-in faith is incompatible with intellectual humility about core Christian claims. For it is possible to have motivated faith commitments that are not fundamentally driven by concern for one’s intellectual ego.

But it is also important to note that all-in faith *can* be driven by such concerns and hence can run afoul of the important Christian call to intellectual humility. Yes, Christians are invited or permitted to a settled allegiance to Christianity – but with side constraints consisting in the ethical teachings of Christianity itself, including the demand that Christians become (intellectually) humble: that is to say, free from egoistic desires like the desire for vindication and triumph over opponents. And it seems a sad fact of our world that a lot of all-in faith is instead driven, in part, by vicious pride.

Conclusion

Christians talk a lot about humility. They also talk a lot about the kinds of radical faith that seem to fly in the face of intellectual humility. Here I have tried to discern how best to resolve this tension, from a Christian perspective. I’ve suggested that Christians should uphold a strong IH requirement, understood as a freedom from (excessive or distracting) ego-concern, which can censure ego-driven, all-in faith while permitting more purely motivated forms.²⁶

Notes

1. All biblical passages are from the New International Version.
2. Pascalian considerations complicate any quick inference from Christians’ costly or ‘risky’ actions to their high confidence in Christianity. Even martyrs needn’t have a particularly high credence in the gospel in order to rationally submit to death, if they believe that Heaven and Hell may hang in the balance. But Christian exhortations to martyrdom or other risky actions aren’t always of the form: do this (despite your doubts), because of the hope of

great reward. Christians also seem invited to act boldly out of a *confidence* in Christ, and this is so even in parts of the tradition that have rejected parts of the soteriological picture Pascal relies on.

3. See also Mark 13: 21–23, where Jesus says: ‘At that time if anyone says to you, “Look, here is the Messiah!” or, “Look, there he is!” do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.’

4. Dormandy (2018) refers to this as the ‘unwavering’ aspect of some religious belief.

5. Thanks to Michael C. Rea for suggesting this term.

6. See Samuelson et al. (2015), referencing Samuelson et al. (2013) (see also Whitcomb et al. 2017); for the related idea that IH constrains our *higher-order* attitudes toward the epistemic justification or reasonableness of our beliefs, see Church and Barrett (2016) and Hazlett (2012).

7. See Porter et al. (2022); they note that including interpersonal dispositions in an account of what’s *essential* to intellectual humility is more common amongst psychologists than philosophers (ibid., 7); here my claim is the weak one that interpersonal, listening, and respect behaviours as well as more general openness to evidence will be a characteristic *expression* of IH.

8. See, e.g., Leary et al. (2017), whose six-item scale measures participants’ agreement with the following items:

- I question my own opinions, positions, and viewpoints because they could be wrong.
- I reconsider my opinions when presented with new evidence.
- I recognise the value in opinions that are different from my own.
- I accept that my beliefs and attitudes may be wrong.
- In the face of conflicting evidence, I am open to changing my opinions.
- I like finding out new information that differs from what I already think is true.

9. This particular way of articulating the puzzle is, to my knowledge, novel. In particular, what is novel is highlighting how various consequences for our views of IH and humility, or the Christian call to (ethical) humility, may result from a failure to reconcile all-in faith with IH. That said, I recognise that others have also considered the question whether Christian faith or religious belief is compatible with intellectual humility. See Dormandy (2018), Elliott (2019), Holley (2017), Malcolm (2021), and Howard-Snyder and Mckaughan (2021).

10. Barring, that is, a normative dilemma within Christian normativity; more on this in the next section.

11. I’ll rely on the work of Roberts and Wood (2007) and Callahan (2022, 2024).

12. Thanks to Amy Flowerree for raising this possibility.

13. Wittgenstein (1969) called the beliefs we hold fixed ‘hinges’. See Wright (2004) for contemporary discussion.

14. Which is not to say they are necessarily inferential or that they are a far cry from basic *perceptual* beliefs. See Alston (1991).

15. Thanks to Brian Cutter for discussion here.

16. In addition to the views mentioned below, see Jackson (2019) and Holley (2017). Holley argues that even some ‘confident’ faith is compatible with ‘the kind of doubt and uncertainty needed for intellectual virtue’ (ibid., 213). He focuses on confidence not in one’s ‘theoretical’ assessment of Christianity but in one’s lived experience of religious life. I remain doubtful that one can enjoy lived confidence in Christianity if one is uncertain of the truth of the religion. But even if one can, I will argue below that high *theoretical* confidence also seems to be Christianity-permitted, in a way that generates tension between some (theoretically confident) faith and IH.

17. Of course, Christians do disagree a lot, and as one referee for this journal has pointed out the mere fact that some Christians say something isn’t much of a reason to believe it (or believe it’s the Christian thing to say). I still think this point carries some, albeit limited, weight in the present context, where weighty Christian thinkers like Kierkegaard and James are involved and where the basic idea – that at least some valuable kinds of faith or trust necessarily go beyond what one knows – is an intuitive and influential one.

18. Elliott (2019) argues for the incompatibility of IH and faith (*simpliciter*) somewhat differently; he gleans definitions of IH and faith from contemporary philosophy and draws out their tensions. He does not seriously consider, however, the kind of ego-concern-based definition of IH to which I’ll ultimately appeal.

19. See Lasonen-Aarnio (2014) for the argument that the compatibility *can* be rational.

20. Dormandy (2018) also argues for this conclusion.

21. Again, Dormandy (2018) agrees. She argues that the ‘dogmatic’ religious believer cannot have ‘epistemic humility’ on the limitations-owning account.

22. Granted, things may be otherwise for a person who has had overwhelmingly probative mystical experiences or something like that.

23. Now, I expect that Whitcomb et al. may disagree. Sure – the person with all-in faith may not own her limitations to any great *degree*. She may not be *open-minded*. But we should separate virtuous intellectual humility – which requires only *appropriate* limitations-owning – from the sheer owning of limitations, and hence from both

the vice of servility and the trait of open-mindedness (see Whitcomb et al. 2020; Battaly 2021). Maybe the person with all-in faith does count as owning her limitations appropriately, even if she doesn't own them (much).

I have critiqued this version of the limitations-owning view, which leans heavily on appeals to appropriateness, elsewhere (Callahan 2022, 2024). Here I'll just add that this version of the view risks making IH too easy for Christians. If it's really somehow 'appropriate' not to own one's limitations when it comes to Christianity, and if IH consists entirely in appropriate limitations-owning, then IH about Christian claims would seem to come for free, for the committed Christian.

24. Dunnington (2018) defends a related account, on which IH involves no concern at all for one's status or ego.

25. Callahan (2022, 2024) emphasises the possibility of non-distracting, high concern for status, specifically thinking about people struggling to be taken seriously in contexts of oppression and marginalisation.

26. I am grateful to audiences at the Center for Philosophy of Religion Discussion Group as well as the Society of Christian Philosophers 45th anniversary conference, both in fall 2023, for extremely helpful feedback on these ideas. I am also particularly grateful to Michael C. Rea for reading drafts and to the John Templeton Foundation for providing research time through the grant 'Intellectual Humility and Oppression' (grant 62636).

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