

From *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*, edited by M. Alfano, M. Lynch, and A. Tanesini, forthcoming.

Humility in the Islamic Tradition

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Abstract. *This chapter explores Islamic approaches to humility by focusing on a number of key contributors to the discourse on character in the Islamic world, notably al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya. As Muslim thinkers articulate the virtue of humility, it possesses two distinct though related dimensions. On the first, humility concerns attitudes to self-worth and self-assessment, which many philosophers and non-philosophers would consider the proper field of this virtue. On the second, it has a forward-looking or conative quality, and is tied to an attitude of moral commitment ultimately co-extensive with the virtue of religious obedience. One of the most distinctive aspects of the approaches to humility and pride in the Islamic tradition is the central role played by temporal concepts. Virtuous attitudes to the self look to the past, but even more importantly, to the future: to as-yet uncertain future outcomes which underline the fragility of virtue. Although the emphasis among these thinkers is on the underestimation of one's merits, there is also a more positive attitude to self-worth that can be gleaned from Islamic works on the virtues.*

A commonplace view of how many religions approach the right relationship to self-worth is that the less we have of it, the better off we are. The virtuous attitude to the self requires thinking poorly of one's merits, and this attitude constitutes the virtue we call humility. This was the view implicitly taken by David Hume when he defended the importance of a "steady and well-establish'd pride and self-esteem" in human life and expressed his expectation that this would draw the animus of a "great many religious declaimers," who typically placed their loyalties in the "monkish" virtue of humility instead (Hume 1978: 599-600, Hume 1975: 270). In framing this point, Hume had primarily Christian attitudes in mind. What about Islamic attitudes?

This chapter attempts to answer this question by a selective survey of the approaches taken by a number of key contributors to the discourse on character in the Islamic world. While this "commonplace view" contains an element of truth when applied to the Islamic tradition, it is a blunt instrument for capturing Islamic thinking on the subject. As Muslim thinkers articulate the virtue of humility, it possesses two distinct though related dimensions. On the first, humility concerns attitudes to self-worth and self-assessment, which many philosophers and also non-philosophers would consider the proper field of this virtue. On the second, by contrast, humility has a forward-looking or conative quality, and is tied to an

attitude of moral commitment that is ultimately co-extensive with the virtue of religious obedience. One of the most distinctive aspects of the approaches to humility and pride in the Islamic tradition, as I will suggest, is the central role played by temporal concepts. Virtuous attitudes to the self look to the past, but even more importantly, to the future: to as-yet uncertain future outcomes which underline the fragility of virtue. Despite the emphasis on the underestimation of self-worth that shapes these approaches, there is also a more positive attitude to self-worth that can be read out of Islamic works on the virtues.

The Ethics of Virtue in a Scriptural Paradigm

Islamic views of the virtues were moulded inside a cadre of overlapping intellectual frameworks, which included influences from pre-Islamic Arab culture, the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, and above all the core religious scriptures, the Qur'an and hadith. The degree to which each of these influences asserted itself varied across different genres and works. In compendia of philosophical ethics, for example—the kind written by philosophers like Abū 'Alī Miskawayh (d. 1030) and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274)—ancient philosophical ideas play a prominent role, outshining that of the scriptural sources. By contrast, in works of Sufi spirituality, which were a key vector for the development of Islamic ideals of character, the influence of these textual sources takes centre stage.

While humility (Arabic *tawāḍu'*) appears in works of philosophical ethics, its treatment is limited. Al-Fārābī (d. 950 or 951), for example, includes it in his *Aphorisms of the Statesman* but has little to say about it (1971: 36). In Miskawayh's classification of the virtues in his *Refinement of Character*, humility is a conspicuous absentee. This may partly reflect the indifference to the virtue among ancient philosophers. It forms a far more important theme in texts more firmly anchored in the scriptural framework. The writers I will be focusing on populate different points of the loose philosophical-scriptural spectrum, with some (notably al-Ghazālī and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī) bearing clear traces of philosophical influence and others (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya) developing their ideas more independently of it. These differences are reflected in the physiognomy of their writing, particularly in the analytical depth to which they are interested in probing ideas and the level of theoretical scaffolding they seek to provide. Even among the more philosophically minded, the practical aims that shape their work mean that ideas often require unpacking to make them speak to the questions we might have about their subject.

Whatever their other differences, the thinkers I will be considering are united by a firm commitment to viewing the scriptural texts as a non-negotiable source of moral guidance. Both the Qur'an and the hadith show a sustained concern with moral questions about how people relate to their merits and about the right and wrong ways of doing so. "Be humble, and let none of you glory over others," one tradition describes the Prophet as urging. According to another, "Nobody will enter paradise who has the merest speck of pride (*kibr*) in his heart." The Qur'an is replete with admonitions against pride and its pernicious consequences. "How evil is the lodging of those that are proud!" (Q 40:76; compare 40:35, 16:29, 39:60). Pride is the failing of key figures in the Qur'an, including Iblis, the counterpart of Satan in the Islamic tradition. Commanded to bow to Adam after the latter's creation, Iblis refuses and haughtily retorts, "I am better than he; You created me of fire, and You created him of clay" (Q 7:12).

Humility as Self-Assessment

Humility, the scriptural sources suggest, is a praiseworthy trait. Yet what then *is* humility? In his influential compendium on the virtues, *The Pathway to the Noble Traits of the Law*, the eleventh-century literary and religious scholar al-Rāghib al-İşfahānī answers this question as follows. Humility is when “a person contents himself with a station (*manzila*) inferior to the one merited by his excellence.” It is a virtue “only found among kings, grandees, and learned men and it falls under the category of gracious acts (*tafaḍḍul*), as it involves forgoing a right (*ḥaqq*)” (al-Rāghib 2007: 213).

The emphasis on social class in this statement will seem puzzlingly narrow, excluding some of the more interesting cases around which questions about humility come up, where merit is a matter of *moral* accomplishment.¹ Yet even more surprising will be the natural way of reading its main thrust: humility, it implies, has to do less with how a person *thinks* of himself than how a person *behaves*. It’s not about making a low estimate of one’s merits but rather of not insisting on the claims these merits would typically generate. We may think here of the magnanimous or great-souled man as described in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, who may choose not to insist on receiving the honour due to him. The obvious implication, in Aristotle’s case as in this one, is that the person has a clear understanding of what is due to him—of his moral worth. Humility here comes across as a species of magnanimity in the recognizable modern sense of the word: a gracious self-concealment and abandonment of social rewards that rests on a robust awareness of one’s actual merits.

Al-Rāghib is not the only Muslim writer to frame humility in these terms, as a kind of social grace pertaining to the sphere of social behaviour.² Yet the more prominent formulations approach humility in terms that will be more familiar to contemporary philosophers and theologians. Humility concerns the way a person assesses their merits. And the right way of assessing one’s merits is presented trenchantly, as a matter of systematic underestimation. The eleventh-century theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) makes this stance clear in his landmark work, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, in the context of a *tour de force* campaign against the vice of pride. One of the many religious sayings he approvingly quotes is the following: “The higher a believer stands in God’s estimate, the lower he stands in his own.” The point is put even more trenchantly in another quote: “God said, ‘You have worth (*qadr*) in our sight so long as you assign yourself none’” (1937-38, 11: 1943, 1959). In this part of the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī offers his readers a raft of moral exercises to help them overcome their pride. The upshot for the reader who carries them out is that he will come to “regard himself with contempt” (*yuḥaqqiru nafsahu*) and perceive “the worthlessness of his being” (*khissat dhātihī*) (1937-38, 11: 1975, 1971).³

The view that humility involves a programmatic underestimation of self-worth that may reach as far as wholesale denial is also conveyed by the later thinker Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) in his spiritual compendium, *Passages of the Wayfarers*, in turn a commentary on an earlier Sufi classic, *Stations of the Journeyers*. “Humility,” he reports, “is to see yourself as having no value (*qīma*)” (2010a: 613). On many occasions, this judgement is framed in absolute terms, as in the statements just cited. On others, it is framed comparatively, as exemplified by Ibn Qayyim himself in another work, *The Book of the Spirit*. Humility means “not to see yourself as superior to anyone or as having claims over anyone, and rather to see other people as superior to you and as having claims over you” (2010b: 658).

Al-Ghazālī, on his part, makes this the basis of a distinction between two vices opposed to humility, pride and conceit (*‘ujb*). Both involve a high estimate of the self, but pride is individuated by the fact that this estimate is framed relative to others, as a judgement of superiority over others. Hence a person could have the vice of conceit even if she was the only human being in existence, but the same isn’t true of pride (1937-38, 11: 1946-47).

In recent times, there have been a number of philosophical attempts to provide an updated and more nuanced account of what humility consists in. Humility, to take some of the best-known versions, is about not *over*-estimating our merits, about owning our limitations, or about lacking self-concern (see, e.g., the overview in Roberts and Cleveland 2016). The views of these Muslim thinkers, by contrast, appear to return us to a more traditional understanding of humility that we find in almost any dictionary we open. Humility (so the *Oxford English Dictionary*) is “the quality of . . . having a lowly opinion of oneself.”

Taken in this form, these views will invite a question familiar to philosophers reflecting on the nature and value of humility. As a matter of fact, some people simply *are* better than others in a range of qualities, including ones of a moral and intellectual kind. Do al-Ghazālī and his peers think we ought to remain *ignorant* of this fact? Does the virtue of humility require wilful self-deception?⁴ We get help toward answering these questions, and a broader perspective on Islamic attitudes to self-worth, if we ask what makes the corresponding vices problematic. Here I will take my lights from al-Ghazālī’s discussion of pride and conceit in the *Revival*, supplementing it with insights provided by other writers.

Al-Ghazālī advances a number of reasons to explain why pride, taken as an attitude to the self incorporating a judgement of superiority over others, is problematic, which we could loosely distinguish into reasons of a utilitarian or forward-looking and a deontological kind. One reason of the first kind reflects a thesis we might call the “unity of the vices.” Vices hang together, just like the virtues do (*al-akhlāq al-dhamīma mutalāzima*). Al-Ghazālī’s argument here is that pride typically prevents us from acquiring other virtues, and naturally leads to or partners with a number of other vices, such as anger, envy, rancour, and dishonesty. It can also lead us to reject the truth, including, importantly, religious truth (on which point, more below) (1937-38, 11: 1947-48, 1951-52).

More interesting, however, is a different kind of reason, which I call “deontological” because it pivots on the notion of a right or a claim. What lends this reason its special interest is that it points to a conceptual model that provided a key framework for thinking about the life of virtue in the Islamic tradition, while at the same time revealing some of its provisos. To become virtuous, on this line of thinking, is to attempt to acquire qualities possessed by God in paradigmatic form: it is to imitate God. God’s character, as al-Ghazālī suggests in one place, provides a *criterion* for what constitutes virtue or true perfection (1937-38, 13: 2335). This model has well-known precedents in the ancient tradition, notably in Plato’s philosophy. In the Islamic world, it played an important role among both Sufi thinkers and philosophers.

In its ancient counterpart, it has sometimes provoked perplexity: how could God, or the gods, possess virtues like temperance or courage when they lack the bodily conditions and limitations that make gluttony or cowardice a temptation among humans (and thus their opposites virtues)?⁵ In the Islamic context, the most important challenge shows up in a different place, and almost in reverse, as a question about whether qualities that are virtues in God are necessarily virtues among humans. Because God’s qualities include a desire for praise, love of self-sufficiency, and a sense of greatness or superiority over other beings (*kibr*, *kibriyā’*). Yet to imitate *these* qualities, and certainly the last, is in fact to expose oneself to divine wrath, as a well-known hadith attests. Al-Rāghib is particularly forthright on this point:

pride is “praiseworthy in God but blameworthy in humans” (2007: 214). God alone is entitled to pride taken as a quality that incorporates a judgement about one’s greatness and superiority over other beings. It constitutes one of God’s special prerogatives and exclusive claims. A human being that possesses this quality therefore antagonises and violates a divine right (al-Ghazālī 1937-38, 11: 1951; cf. Ibn Qayyim 2010b: 659, al-Makkī 2001, 2: 1042-43).

Put so simply, the force of the idea may not seem obvious. Surely we could grant that only God is entitled to judge himself absolutely great, and also comparatively greater than everyone else, while retaining our ability to make comparative judgements in the human context, and to say that certain people (including ourselves) are better than others? Judgements of worth are not a zero-sum game.

To this, al-Ghazālī and his peers would, I believe, offer a number of responses. On the one hand, it’s not that such comparative judgements, on the horizontal (human) plane, couldn’t be made; it’s that vertical comparison renders them meaningless. Once we have set the scale for wisdom, for example, using God’s wisdom, the comparison between my level of knowledge as a scholar of Renaissance literature and yours as the possessor of a mere high-school diploma is like comparing shades of grey after having looked directly at the sun, or like comparing the size of molehills around one’s feet having just looked up at a sheer cliff towering hundreds of meters above. It can be done, but the comparison seems meaningless. As in the experience of the sublime (which my last example may evoke), the vision of the vertical scale has a deflationary effect (though, unlike the sublime, this effect is not superseded by a new frisson of pride).

A second response is more illuminating and decisive, though it takes a little more work to spell it out. What is wrong with human pride, and the judgements of worth it incorporates, can’t be gotten at simply by examining the judgements themselves taken as pure abstract propositions. As Ghazālī explains at various points in the *Revival*, vices, like virtues, are composites made up of a number of elements. They include an element of cognition (*ma’rifa*), a phenomenology or felt emotion (*ḥāl*), and action (*‘amal*). The bare judgement (*ru’ya* or *‘aqīda*) that one has a superior status to another is not a sufficient condition for pride to be realised. It only becomes pride when conjoined to a particular phenomenology, which al-Ghazālī describes as a sense of “confidence, exultation, joy, and repose in this judgement” (1937-38, 11: 1946). Phenomenologically inflected this way, it then expresses itself outwardly in one’s behaviour toward others.

To appreciate the force of this point, we need to see it as flagging an important link between two vices that al-Ghazālī presents as distinct but interrelated, pride and conceit. Unlike pride, as already mentioned, conceit doesn’t have a comparative dimension. Instead, what individuates it is a different cognitive component. A person is conceited when they take satisfaction in a quality they possess without referring this quality to any other source than themselves. They take pleasure in it under its description as a quality that is entirely their own. The vicious cognition here is privative, and the positive cognition it excludes is the role of God’s agency in making one’s virtues possible. Conceit is therefore based on a false concept of ownership, and entails an equally false sense of security. The phenomenology of conceit involves a pleased sense of confidence and repose (*rukūn*) (1937-38, 11: 1991-92; cf. Vasalou 2019: xx). These, of course, are the same words we just heard al-Ghazālī use to describe the phenomenology of pride. This is no accident, as conceit, in his view, is a vice that is prior to and a cause of pride. The feeling of happy self-assurance and secure possession of the valued trait is thus a shared feature in both vices.

Al-Ghazālī's response to this shared feature holds the key to explaining the problem, or one of the chief problems, with pride. Both pride and conceit can be described as vices of ignorance or self-deception, because the sense of self-assurance that constitutes them belies important facts concerning our dependence on God. This is a dependence that crucially cuts in two directions, or along two temporal lines. On the one hand, every perfection we possess in the present rests on a number of preconditions and prior causes. And all these causes, in al-Ghazālī's view, have been supplied by God in a series of undeserved acts of benefaction. We're like a servant whom a great king has had washed and combed and dressed up in his own finery. If the servant then marvels at himself, he is marvelling at the king's handiwork, not his own.⁶ The servant is not responsible for his beautiful appearance and deserves no credit for it. In the same way, we are not responsible for our beautiful character and other accomplishments and any credit is due to their real author, God.

This position has an important entailment for the emotional attitudes with which we relate to our virtues. The exulting sense of self-assurance that shapes the vice of pride cannot survive the acknowledgement that we are not responsible for our virtues. Self-assurance is replaced by a trembling awareness of the fragility of virtue. This view evidently rests on the endorsement of a particularly uncompromising form of determinism, which, here at least, al-Ghazālī isn't concerned to camouflage or sugar-coat.

This acknowledgement of dependence and resulting perception of the fragility of virtue, which looks to the past, finds its natural complement in another acknowledgement that looks to the future. Because a person who at time t_1 finds herself endowed with great moral or intellectual virtue, as the result of causal chains lying outside her control, simply cannot guarantee that her virtue will endure all the way to the unknown future time t_x when death comes to her. And it is her spiritual state and spiritual performance at the moment of death, as al-Ghazālī emphasises, that determines her otherworldly destiny, whether she will be happy or unhappy (see 1937-38, 13: 2363-75).

In fact, al-Ghazālī seems prepared to go further. It's not just that we don't *know* for certain whether our present perfections will endure over time and pass the test at the final instants of our life (the *khātima*, or conclusion of life). It's that in a deeper sense we can't properly be said to *possess* particular perfections in the present time so long as the future outcome remains uncertain. This is suggested by another intervention al-Ghazālī makes on the topic of pride, explaining why it is inappropriate for humans but not God. The issue, al-Ghazālī says, is that pride must have a proper foundation; and human beings can never be certain of that foundation, since it depends on a future eventuality. "Were a person to judge that he possesses [an] attribute with a definiteness admitting no doubt," then pride "*would* be appropriate for him and would be a virtue (*faḍīla*) with respect to him. Yet he has no way of knowing this, for this depends on the conclusion, and he does not know what the conclusion will be" (1937-38, 13: 2415).

This may seem like a puzzling position to take: how could what happens in the future affect what is true in the present? Surely we possess our virtues *now*, regardless of what happens at a later time? If we take a virtue in a familiar Aristotelian sense, as a stable disposition to be understood as a realised structure in psychological space, the idea may indeed appear alien. Yet even in an Aristotelian context, virtues as dispositions cannot be separated from the expressions and performances they give rise to. Whether a person possesses a disposition is after all a judgement we make, not something we discover by looking directly into their psychological space. And how a person goes on to emote, think, and

act at a future moment affects whether we still feel comfortable ascribing a certain trait to her, and may lead us to revise our earlier judgement (“She was not *really* generous after all”).

This analogy is certainly relevant for making sense of al-Ghazālī’s point. But it doesn’t entirely capture the significance that the temporal horizon of the future possesses in al-Ghazālī’s thinking and that of many of his peers. We can appreciate this more fully by considering the distinctive cognitions that constitute the mindset of the person affected by the vice of pride, as al-Ghazālī characterizes him. The person who has a (false) sense of confidence about his perfections is not simply confident about something he possesses in the present. To the extent that he is a believing Muslim, his sense of confidence about the present translates into a sense of confidence about the future, and about how he will be treated in the next life. His judgement about his merits is also a judgement about how *God* is judging his merits, and the value he attaches to his moral and intellectual *state* is intrinsically bound up with the *standing* he believes it secures with God.⁷ This part of the proud person’s mindset is no vice, but an essential (if not exhaustive) aspect of the eudaimonistic view of virtue championed in the *Revival*, which encourages us to see virtue as a necessary means to (primarily) otherworldly happiness.

In the terms of this theological economy, then, virtue looks to the future in a more fundamental way. This is what gives teeth to al-Ghazālī’s critique of pride and conceit and his emphasis on the fragility of our virtues. To return to our earlier question: Do al-Ghazālī and his peers think we should remain ignorant of our merits and of the differences in merit between different people? Does humility require self-deception? On the one hand, these differences will seem far less significant when measured against the scale of virtue, God himself. On the other, they will seem shorn of significance when considered against our lack of responsibility for their past production and our inability to control the future. *Real* self-deception is not when we try to pretend we don’t possess a quality we in fact do; it’s when we think we possess a quality while disregarding how we got there and what may still go wrong.

Yet once we have added these metaphysical “plug-ins” which undercut the objectionable attitudes of self-assurance, self-ownership, and scorn for others, this view would seem to be compatible with a type of self-knowledge that includes accurate judgements on our character, including our virtues. Such self-knowledge is after all *practically* important, and affects how we go about our efforts at self-governance and moral change. A person who can’t frame the thought that she has a problematic relationship to physical enjoyments but *not* to money, or that she struggles to pass up opportunities to cheat but is easily touched by others’ suffering and energised to relieve it, would not make a good planner when it comes to choosing what parts of her character to focus her efforts on. Despite the rather extreme view of the present’s dependence on the future conveyed by al-Ghazālī above, al-Ghazālī himself acknowledges this practical need for self-knowledge elsewhere. At a particularly suggestive point of the *Revival*, he counsels his reader to draw up a kind of workbook or logbook (*jarīda*) and organise it by making a list of the most important virtues and vices (20 in total). When he manages to remove one of the vices from his character, he can cross it off his list and continue moving down, and he can do the same when he acquires one of the virtues (1937-38, 15: 2807).

This exercise may remind us of Benjamin Franklin’s industrious 13-week plan to cultivate the virtues. What is worth underlining is the premise that evidently supports it, which is that we can assess our strengths or weaknesses in a reasonably definite way—that is, definite enough to inform our practical efforts and make us decide to stop pursuing one

virtue and continue with another. Yet crucially, this assessment is embedded in a paradigm shaped by a clear awareness of one's dependencies. Once a person has succeeded in removing a vice, he must "thank God for delivering him from it and . . . bear in mind that this only occurred through God's assistance" (ibid). Self-knowledge, divorced from gleeful self-assurance and instead infused with a grateful acknowledgement of dependence and an anxious-but-hopeful sense of fragility, is not only possible but necessary. It is important here that self-knowledge is rooted in a practical concern, in which the self shows up as an object of practical endeavour, and not as something firmly possessed but as a work-in-progress.

Humility as Moral Commitment

In the above, I sketched out some of the elements of the view of humility, taken as a virtue regulating the proper attitude to the self and its merits, that emerges from the works of a number of writers, including al-Ghazālī. Humility, on this view, involves making a low estimate of one's merits. This view is situated in a field shaped by several theological presumptions, including ideas about the imitation of God (and its limits) and human dependence. Among other things, I emphasized the crucial role played by temporal concepts in Muslim thinkers' understanding of the virtues.

Yet looking at these same ethical works, one finds another conception of humility at work that cannot be entirely assimilated to this one. Rather than having a reflexive attitude (a relation to the self) at its core, the core of this other conception is a relation to authority, particularly religious or supernatural authority. Discussing pride in the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī distinguishes between three types of pride: one directed toward God, another directed toward God's human emissaries or representatives, and a third toward other human beings (1937-38, 11: 1949-52). The third is the reflexive one we considered above, and al-Ghazālī declares it the least important of the three. In fact, one of the reasons he gives for considering it a vice (in addition to the ones mentioned above) is the fact that it leads to pride in the first two senses. It makes us more likely to reject the truth claims of God's human emissaries and thereby prevents us from accepting God's authority. This point reflects the influence of the scriptures in shaping ethical discourse about this virtue. In the Qur'an, many critical references to pride occur in the context of condemning those who resist God's message (e.g. Q: 16:22, 25:21).

If al-Ghazālī puts the point with reference to the vice, pride, Ibn Qayyim frames it more directly with reference to the virtue, humility. He identifies two types of humility, which are distinguished through their object—what they are humility *to* or *before*. The first involves being humbled to or before God's greatness, and results in the kind of reflexive attitude to the self we have already seen. The second is when "a person humbles himself before [or abases himself to] God's command by obeying and before his prohibition by abstaining." He continues: "When a person holds himself to God's command and prohibition, he humbles himself before the state of servitude (*'ubūdiyya*)" (Ibn Qayyim 2010b: 658-59).

The conjunction between humility and obedience, to be sure, will not be unfamiliar. These virtues have often been drawn together across their history, not just in the Christian context, where they epitomised the ethic of monastic communities, but also in the ancient world. In one of the few seemingly positive references to humility in ancient philosophy, in Plato's *Laws*, humility is linked to adherence to justice and the divine law, while pride leads to the rejection of guidance and authority (716a-b). Ibn Qayyim, it may be noted, does not

present humility as a virtue separate from obedience and *leading* to the latter. Rather, humility just *is* a form of obedience. Yet his distinction between two types of humility maps on to what we would be inclined to describe, as a matter of ordinary language, as a distinction between “humility” and “obedience.” And having drawn this distinction, he makes clear that the first type *entails* (*yastalzimu*) the second (and *not* vice versa) (2010b: 659).

On one level, this causal link may not seem self-evident. Holding another person in high esteem and thinking poorly of yourself by comparison seems to be a very different thing from doing what that person tells you. But the gap closes up if we focus on the features that justify the feelings of esteem and admiration. If you admire a person for their creativity, that may not necessarily give you reasons to take their opinion about how you should lead your life more broadly, though you may seek out their view on occasions where you think that a knack for thinking outside the box is what’s especially required. If part of what you admire in that person is their wisdom or kindness, however, you have good reasons to give serious consideration to their judgements about the choices you should make on a variety of matters.

The features you admire in a person may thus provide you with a range of different motives for accepting their judgement. Yet this account of the relations between humility-in-our-sense and obedience-in-our-sense (humility 1 and humility 2 on Ibn Qayyim’s terms) is ultimately on the wrong track as a way of approaching the present case. This is clear from the fact that while this model may explain why you should “give consideration,” even special consideration, to another’s judgement, it is harder to see how it could be used to explain why you should *obey* them and take orders as against advice from them. The concepts of obedience and disobedience, as one Mu’tazilite theologian points out, involve a reference to *status* or *rank* (*rutba*). They presuppose that the person disobeying occupies an inferior status relative to the person being disobeyed (Mānkḏīm Shashḏīw 1965: 611). Hence you can disobey the king or your father, but you can’t disobey a friend or a child.

The description under which you esteem or venerate God (“humility 1”) and which induces obedience to his command (“humility 2”) is not in the first instance⁸ particular attributes such as God’s wisdom or benevolence—though these attributes play a crucial role in helping you *rationaly appropriate* the religious life and thereby sustaining your relationship to it. (“God has good reasons for commanding me to do certain things: he knows they’re good for me.”) It is God’s status as the sovereign or master (*rabb*) or proprietor (*mālik*) of your being, relative to whom your own status as a human being is that of a subject or subordinate (*‘abd*). To acquiesce to God’s command is to acknowledge this differential status and to accept one’s servitude (*‘ubūdiyya*). As sovereign, God has a claim to obedience that cannot be reduced to the claims created by potentially other-regarding (hence anthropocentric) attributes such as wisdom and benevolence. We might thus describe it as deontological in nature. A key condition of this kind of obedience is that we be at least *in part* unable to plumb the reasons behind God’s commands and rationally appropriate them by subsuming them into our conceptions of the good (see e.g. Ibn Qayyim 2010a: 619, al-Ghazālī 1937-38, 2: 385-86).

So humility in this second sense is based on a recognition of status relations (God/human, sovereign/subject). But it is worth underlining a point that is implicit in this conception, and is already made obvious if we systematically resort to the English “obedience” to translate what is a single Arabic term in our writers. Unlike the first kind of humility we considered, which focuses on self-assessment and looks backwards to existing features of the self, this kind of humility looks forward in a more fundamental way. It is a conative quality, which takes shape as a sense of commitment to adhering to a set of

evaluative standards as expressed in God’s Law. We see this even more clearly if we consider the vice that Ibn Qayyim opposes to humility in the *Book of the Spirit*. Ibn Qayyim’s concern, interestingly, is not with the vice that represents the extreme of excessively *high* (usually populated by pride) but on the vice representing the opposite end of excessively *low*. He calls it “self-abasement” or “abjectness” (*mahāna*).¹ The idea that there could be such a thing as being *too* humble may seem to us surprising given the emphasis on radical under-estimation that shapes the attitudes to self-assessment we surveyed. Yet Ibn Qayyim’s understanding of this particular vice has a tellingly different focus. The abject person, he writes, is one who “sacrifices and demeans his soul in the pursuit of its pleasures and appetites” (2010b: 658). Abjectness is thus a vice that involves failure to master inferior desires—an idea that evidently presupposes acceptance of an evaluative standard that ranks desires as inferior or superior and tells us that certain desires *ought* to be mastered. Abjectness is the failure to live up to this standard. Humility is the virtue of the one who succeeds.

In answering the question “Is there such a thing as being too humble?” Ibn Qayyim’s focus, I just suggested, is not on self-assessment (on the question whether one could ever think too little of oneself) but on moral commitment and self-command. Yet a closer examination of his remarks may make us wonder whether that is entirely correct. Ibn Qayyim speaks of not “sacrificing” one’s soul and of “demeaning” it. His choice of words implies an ascription of value, and it is not the value attaching to the moral standards themselves. If we wished to unpack the point, we might in fact venture to say the following. Some kind of value is being attached to the self or soul that seems to stand in an *explanatory* relation to the kind of self-mastery being more directly valorised. It is *because* we value our soul that we ought to value self-mastery and hold ourselves to these moral standards.

Here, I would suggest, we have the kernel of a more positive relation to the self that forms the counterweight of the austere view of humility found among the writers we have considered. And while we just saw it reflected in the description of a vice, it receives more direct expression in the account given by a number of writers for a positive virtue. Al-Rāghib refers to this virtue using the Arabic term *‘izza*, while Ibn Qayyim refers to it as *sharaf al-nafs*.² Both terms could be translated as “a sense of dignity,” “a sense of honour,” or even “pride.” Putting aside delicate differences between their accounts, both writers present it as a virtue that concerns self-worth, and take self-worth to be expressed in the moral standards to which a person holds himself. A sense of dignity, Ibn Qayyim writes, involves “preserving oneself from base things, vices (*radhā’il*), and the kinds of desires that bring ruin to men, so that one exalts oneself above them” (2010b: 656). In al-Rāghib’s words, it is a matter of “holding oneself above anything that inflicts a blemish upon a person” (2007: 215). Both definitions involve a distinct element of self-exaltation. It’s a matter of not *stooping* to defective (immoral) actions or traits. The sense is that to do so wouldn’t be *worthy* of one, and that one should value oneself higher.

Although self-assessment is evidently at stake in this virtue, it will be clear the concept of self-worth it mobilises is rather different from the one that underpinned our earlier discussion of how Muslim thinkers approach a person’s relationship to her merits. Rather than looking backward, to existing merits, it looks forward, to the acquisition of merits and indeed the avoidance of demerits. A while ago, the philosopher Elizabeth Telfer drew a distinction

¹ Compare Ibn Qayyim 2010a: 596, where humility is designated the virtuous mean relative to the vice of abjectness on the one end and pride on the other.

² The terminological difference shouldn’t be magnified; Ibn Qayyim himself juxtaposes the two terms elsewhere as if they were interchangeable. See e.g. 2010a: 597, where he focuses on *‘izza* as the virtue term.

between two kinds of self-respect, which she called “estimative” and “conative.” The former is a favourable attitude to the self that is grounded in one’s “modes of conduct and qualities character” and more broadly in the sense that one “attains at least some minimum standard.” The latter is different, and is evidenced in common expressions such as “Self-respect prevented me from acting that way” or “He did it out of self-respect.” Rather than being explained by past behaviour and success in meeting relevant standards, self-respect here explains behaviour and motivates efforts to uphold standards. Self-respect in this second sense is “roughly a desire not to behave in a manner unworthy oneself, or a disposition which prevents one from behaving in a manner unworthy of oneself” (Telfer 1968: 114-115).

The kind of virtue that Ibn Qayyim and al-Rāghib describe can be helpfully compared to this second concept of self-respect. This is a relationship to self-worth that achieves its highest expression in a commitment to certain standards about how one should act and about the kind of person one should be. As such, it does not involve an escape from the human condition of servitude but the fullest realisation of it. God’s claim of mastery over our being takes shape as a claim that we exercise self-mastery. It is in this kind of Janus-faced mastery, which looks above (to God, accepting his governance) and below (to the self, imposing governance to its inferior parts) that human dignity is to be realized. Al-Rāghib again puts it clearly: “The dignity (*sharaf*) of created beings lies in manifesting their servitude” (2007: 214). In obedience, the truest humility and the best kind of pride coincide.

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¹ By contrast, the definition offered by Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (d. 974) in his *Refinement of Character* (1978: 88), which otherwise has much in common with al-Rāghib's, is more amenable to this broader construal.

² Surprisingly, al-Ghazālī himself offers a view of this kind at one point in the *Revival*: al-Ghazālī 1937-38, 11: 1987-88. See Vasalou 2019: xx for discussion. The same applies to Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (1978: 88); though a Christian, his work was influential in the Muslim context.

³ For further discussion of al-Ghazālī's view of humility, see Schillinger 2012, Vasalou 2019, part 1, and Sherif 1975: 53-56.

⁴ This is the question that frames Norvin Richards' discussion of humility in Richards 1988, and it made waves in the form given to it by Julia Driver in her analysis of modesty as a virtue of ignorance (Driver 2001, chapter 2).

⁵ I have in mind some of Nussbaum's remarks in Nussbaum 1990, chapter 15. See also Vasalou 2018.

⁶ My analogy is loosely based on al-Ghazālī 1937-38, 12: 2228-29. For al-Ghazālī's extended discussion of this point, see 1937-38, 11: 1992-97, and also Vasalou 2019: xx.

⁷ Cf. al-Ghazālī's telling characterisation of the pride of the learned man: "he views himself as having a higher status and greater merit than others *with God/in God's eyes*" (*'inda Allāh ta'ālā a'lā wa-aḥḍal minhū*) (1937-38, 11: 1953).

⁸ I add the rider because the issue is far more complex taken as a broader question about what motivates obedience to the religious Law. God's more anthropocentric ("beautiful") features partner more subtly with his self-centric ("sublime") features in answering this question. For a wedge into this nuance, see al-Ghazālī's discussion of types of obligation in 1937-38, 2: 385-86, and my discussion of the two standpoints on God in Vasalou 2016, chapter 4, esp. 176-77.