

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND “SUBCLINICAL NARCISSISM” IN THE ACADEME Considerations for Faculty and Institutional Leadership

John Banja
Emory University

INTRODUCTION

Although there is no end of ethics courses offered at our colleges and universities, many believe that neither the professoriate nor their institutional leaders has ever been collectively and authentically committed to shaping the moral formation of students (Keenan, 2015; Lynch, 2017). That indifference may be changing, however. A considerable literature has emerged over the last decade alleging a widespread “subclinical” narcissism among millennials, that is, a literature referring to a range of narcissisticlike traits or behaviors that do not meet the threshold of a diagnosis of pathological narcissism but are nevertheless worrisome. Jean Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University, has written extensively on this kind of narcissism appearing among the millennial or “GenMe”

generation and in 2013 painted a depressing picture:

Compared to Boomers and GenX’ers, GenMe was significantly less likely to express empathy for out-groups, donate to charity, or say it was important to have a job worthwhile to society. Declines in civic orientation and social action were even more steep, with fewer saying they were interested in social problems of the nation and the world, fewer interested in government, and fewer interested in getting involved in politics (e.g., writing to a public official). Surprisingly, GenMe was also less likely than Boomers or GenX’ers to take action to help the environment and save energy.... Another in-depth, recent study of young adults concluded that many saw no reason to help others and that the vast majority (96%) were uninterested in civic and political affairs. (Twenge, 2013, p. 16)

While not everyone accepts these characterizations (see, for example, Wetzel et al., 2017, p. 1845), this article is hardly alone in taking the

• Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: John Banja, jbanja@emory.edu

Journal of Character Education, Volume 17(2), 2021, pp. 85–92
Copyright © 2021 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1543-1223
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

trend seriously and especially wondering whether university faculty might be contributing to or even encouraging it. For example, some instructors, especially ones in business management programs, are raising acute concern over the ways “business schools are reinforcing narcissism in the classroom” (Westerman et al., 2012, p. 11). These persons allege some faculty display a marked indifference toward students scoring high in narcissism (e.g., arrogance, a sense of entitlement, and close-mindedness) but low in humility (e.g., other-regard, emotional regulation, and open-mindedness). This article will comment on these worries and suggest ways that the professoriate, rather than university leadership, might best advance the cause of humility. Many of my observations will be anecdotal and draw on over 40 years of experience as a faculty member at various colleges and universities. Nevertheless, I think some of them will sound very familiar and hope that they might advance the cause of instilling some degree of at least “intellectual” humility among students and our faculties.

THE CASE FOR HUMILITY AND ITS “INTELLECTUAL” SUBDOMAIN

Jacqueline Bergman and her colleagues (2010) have provided a serviceable list of “subclinical” narcissistic traits that might appear on our campuses. They include students who are interpersonally exploitative and arrogant; who are poor team players; who blame others for failures; are overly competitive; feel excessively entitled; are hypersensitive to negative feedback or feel above criticism or above the rules; cannot admit that others are just as smart; and are made extremely uncomfortable by the possibility that they are “ordinary.”

Bergman and her peers make the point that subclinical narcissistic traits might be useful to students in the short term, such as, enhance the student’s likability, yield short-term victories in competitive tasks, and token leadership qualities. But once these students graduate and

enter the management work world, worries abound as to how their narcissistic traits and propensities might destroy morale and motivation, damage teamwork, create deep job insecurities among supervisees, and disrupt the fair allocation of credit and blame (Ou et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013). Indeed, their entrenched self-confidence can be destructive on an international scale as Kevin Hassett (2009) speculated in his article “Harvard Narcissists With MBAs Killed Wall Street.”

Let us concede for the sake of argument that these narcissistic manifestations, especially as they become increasingly advanced or calcified, are largely undesirable. Turning our attention to humility, we should note that its contemporary construction does not connote the absence of narcissism but rather a lack of self-focused attention coupled with good emotional regulation and a genuine sense of empathy. June Price Tangney (2000, 2009), who has written extensively on humility, notes that its prototype includes an accurate opinion of oneself, a willingness to admit mistakes, keeping one’s talents and accomplishments in perspective, understanding and accepting one’s imperfections and weaknesses, being free from arrogance, and maintaining healthy rather than low self-esteem. Tangney also thinks that authentic humility may be relatively rare, indeed, that it might be “quite antithetical with human nature” (2000, p. 79). She adds the provocative insight that authentically humble persons seem almost preternaturally “self-forgetful” insofar as, and in marked contrast to narcissists, they tend to have “a relative lack of self-focus or self-preoccupation” (p. 72).

The epistemic value of humility traits and attitudes seems obvious and the remainder of this paper will examine one of humility’s subdomains, namely, “intellectual humility” (Davis et al., 2016). Intellectual humility is of particular interest in this paper because it seems exactly what every professor (as well as his or her institutional leaderships) would want to cultivate among students and, as will be argued, is a more realistic objective for committed faculty than overhauling an individual’s

subclinical narcissism into one of *general* humility.

NARCISSISM AND INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

Richard Paul (2000) has described intellectual humility as “the lack of intellectual pretentiousness, boastfulness or conceit, combined with insight into the logical foundations, or lack of such foundations, of one’s beliefs” (p. 166). Alternatively, Paul suggests that intellectual arrogance would consist in things like students’ failing to notice the dissonance (or hypocrisy) between the standards they apply to themselves versus those they apply to others; failing to empathize; and failing to grasp and appreciate another’s point of view, perhaps because the requisite questioning of their beliefs or attitudes would be too psychologically painful.

Consider the role a faculty might play in *modeling* either narcissistic or humble attitudes. As Westerman and his colleagues (2012) noted: “If faculty are narcissists or model narcissism in the form of self-aggrandizing, me-first attitudes and behaviors, it may be more difficult to address narcissism in the classroom” (p. 24). Whereas the narcissistic professor of 40 years ago brings to my mind a supercilious, senior-level professor boisterously holding forth at some faculty gathering on why his son wisely rejected a cardiothoracic surgery fellowship from Harvard, I suggest that today’s narcissistic professor is very different. Although mental health professionals admit numerous types of narcissists, one that Ted Millon (1996) discusses in his monumental *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV and Beyond* is the “compulsive narcissist”—a personality type that may be fairly common on our college and university campuses (as well as other high productivity pressure, meritocratic work environments). This is an individual whom psychoanalysts believe grew up markedly anxious about his—it is usually a him—lovability and learned in childhood how

to secure what he most craves: parental notice and affection (Webber, 2016). His solution was to develop an exceptional competence in something his parents would notice and value. For the narcissist-turned-professor, this will often be academic accomplishment, but for others, it might involve winning at athletic or beauty competitions. For the late comedian and actor Robin Williams, it was what became an obsessive need to make others laugh (Leight, 2018).

Over the decades, I have been struck by how many academics engage in a virtually compulsive pursuit of research grants, publications, leadership positions, promotion, and so forth, largely—at least if they suffer from some degree of “compulsive” narcissism rather than just taking enormous delight in the effort—to placate their self-esteem anxieties. Like many millennial narcissists, I cannot help but think they are acutely uncomfortable at the thought of being or seeming ordinary since they have learned to equate ordinariness with worthlessness. But whereas the millennial narcissist feels special as a matter of right, the compulsive narcissist only understands his specialness according to his last outstanding accomplishment.

In the classroom, I fear this professor’s relational style will resemble the way most narcissists regard others: without genuine interest. For these persons, teaching excellence means a superb if not transcendent command of the material, that is, they are content experts, rather than with knowing how to use the classroom to advance the development of students’ knowledge and self-formation (Trigwell & Shale, 2004). The primary response the narcissistic professor wants from students is admiration if not adulation. If the professor is also the student’s supervisor, the performance bar will be set very high because the student’s performance will be an extension of the professor’s personal excellence. Oftentimes, these faculty will “merge” their identity with the material they teach or study because they want to bask in the latter’s perceived grandness or magnificence. And it often works or at least impresses

others. I cannot help recalling my fellow graduate students of 40 years ago saying in hushed and genuflective tones about Professor X, “Ooohhh, he’s an Hegelian.”

In contrast to this narcissistlike professorial presence, Keith Trigwell and Suzanne Shale (2004) argue that the more humble and probably more effective instructor is not necessarily a content expert but more a choreographer of learning. For these persons, humility in teaching consists in “the capacity of a teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students” (p. 528, quoting Schulman, 1987). This is an individual who will be very concerned with how students are receiving and processing material; be continuously interested in feedback; and will habitually evaluate the effectiveness of his or her instruction in real time. With experience, this instructor develops an acute sense of teaching techniques that work and ones that don’t. He or she will continuously monitor the epistemic temperature of the classroom and vary his or her teaching style accordingly. The instructor will be keen to experiment with new instructional approaches and will always understand his or her relationship with students as a partnership. Such an intellectually humble approach is profoundly empathic, and it is hard to imagine students failing to appreciate it.

STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

I have come this far in the essay without commenting on my personal battle with narcissism. My self-awareness began about 30 years ago, when I started studying the nature of empathy in psychologically painful health care conversations, and more recently as I studied the phenomenon of harm-causing medical error and its disclosure to harmed parties (Banja, 2005). What I learned about empathy and humility during that time caused me con-

siderable distress as I painfully recalled many moments of arrogance during the first 15 years of my career. I am once again indebted to Jacqueline Bergman and her colleagues from Appalachian State University for supplying a robust list of strategies, listed in Table 1, whereby faculty might foster intellectual humility, both among their students and themselves. I cannot resist commenting on a select few with some autobiographical asides.

Choreograph the classroom as a learning alliance of the teacher and the students. I have come to think the ideal learning arrangement is one wherein participants are continuously reflecting on and exchanging relevant information, albeit perhaps directed and advanced by the instructor. The great advantage that a live, electronically unmediated classroom has over other forms of instruction is the opportunity for real-time group learning, insight sharing, critical analysis, and, frankly, fun. Consequently, I have come to regard the professorial lecture as increasingly less valuable, especially as millennials seem to enjoy learning from one another. In that vein, I recall with acute embarrassment a remark I made to one of my very first classes, when I was a new teaching fellow in the philosophy department at Fordham University in 1971. Flushed with my fellowship and intoxicated by the power of the podium and the subject matter I was to teach, I said something to a class of about 30 freshmen and sophomores like, “I know that only a few of you are really interested in philosophy. But those few are the ones in this room that I’m really interested in.” So, not only did my defensiveness mixed with arrogance hurt and devalue many in the class, but today my attitude would be exactly the opposite: The disinterested ones would be the ones I’d want to engage. The already interested will likely remain so even if I had presented a mediocre course. But for many of our undergraduates over the course of their lifetimes, the only concentrated exposure to an intellectual content in which they are not specializing will be a course like the one I was teaching. For professors to fail to seize the opportunity to motivate them

TABLE 1
Enhancing Intellectual Humility

To enhance intellectual humility among students, faculty can:

- increase assessments and periodic quizzes, grading, and feedback;
- create devil advocacy groups;
- have anonymous students in class provide feedback;
- request student evaluations of one another’s opinions;
- encourage role play in class;
- create cognitive dissonance by challenging students’ opinions with troubling counter examples;
- have students perform community outreach;
- implement students’ self-assessment;
- conduct personality inventories;
- increase perspective taking and self-awareness;
- minimize unrealistic expectations that might accompany a sense of entitlement;
- invite other faculty who model humility;
- model the humble reception of feedback from students;
- suggest that the classroom is an alliance between the instructor and the students; and
- use case studies

Source: Adapted from Bergman et al. (2010).

through a teacher-student alliance seems like a minitragedy. But the instructor who is narcissistically blinded by the grandeur of his subject matter such that it overwhelms his or her appreciation of how teaching and learning can best proceed is unlikely to think that way, just as I didn’t many years ago.

Invite other faculty who model humility traits. Pat Croskerry, a physician-professor who is an international leader in researching mindfulness in medical decision making, told me that at his medical school in Dalhousie, Nova Scotia, a large number of very senior and much admired physician faculty address newly admitted medical students on humility every year. The instructional method, however, is that each physician-professor describes some of his or her most botched cases, thus impressing on their young listeners that even the best of the best commit errors and that the optimal response to such occurrences is transparency and humility. Similarly, I will admit to students enrolled in my bioethics courses that I have only a poor idea how to resolve this case or that; that I never understood this or that

principle or theory; and that multiple failures in one’s vocational life are inevitable and, by the way, here are some of mine.

Model receiving feedback from students. Given the previous example, I can recall a time when I stubbornly resisted admitting ignorance in class. Again and going back 4 decades, I distinctly remember a female student in one of my formal logic classes who drove me to distraction by asking very perspicacious questions about the material that bore on deep philosophical issues. I simply wanted to dazzle the class with how well I knew the material and became exasperated over this student’s constantly making me feel stupid. Today, I would readily admit ignorance and even embarrassment to the class at not having a response. I would ask the class whether anyone had a response and if not, pursue the question next time after I did some homework. But I also know that today I would take this student aside and tell her how greatly impressed I am with her aptitude for critical thinking. I still remember her after more than 40 years, and I very much hope she has had a splendid career.

Let students do more teaching. Because my academic development through graduate school largely consisted of listening to lectures, I assumed that that modality was the optimal or at least the preferred method of instruction. Today, I am considerably less certain. Millennials are said to enjoy learning from one another and I have learned that if an instructor allows that to happen, the net results will at least be tolerable if not very satisfying. While professors might fret over whether increasing the number of student presentations risks diluting the material or misses certain of its really critical points, my impression—especially with graduate students—is that there are more than enough epistemic gains and overall enjoyment in the classroom to compensate for whatever losses might occur. Besides, the professorial lecture that consumes the entire class time assumes that its intelligibility and import are sufficiently appreciated and registered by the students—a narcissistically based assumption that might be quite wrong.

Case Studies. The value of case studies in cultivating intellectual humility often consists in how they can provide a reality check or at least a psychological one. Students with “sub-clinical” narcissism may very well harbor calcified attitudes and beliefs until they are confronted with complex case scenarios that create cognitive dissonance with their entrenched beliefs and ideas. In turn, resolving that dissonance may require a thorough evaluation of all the informational and psychological variables at play. Class discussion around case studies can gently perturb a budding narcissist’s intellectual pretensions and intransigence and encourage greater open-mindedness. Instructors can also have students role-play various characters in the case studies—especially the ones whose positions are disagreeable, somewhat as law students are assigned different advocacy roles in mock litigation exercises—so as to encourage openness to other points of view.

SUCCESS PROSPECTS FOR INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

An interesting challenge to all of the above takes its leave from postmodernist critiques that question the idea of any single moral platform being superior to another. In other words, this paper’s discussions of millennial narcissism and humility cultivation may be taken to task for being without contemporary normative justification. And it is true that many instructors scoff at the idea of professors helping students find meaning and purpose in life, and they point to postmodernist critiques that repudiate the persuasiveness of philosophical accounts that argue the nature of “the good life” and its component virtues (Robinson & Glanzer, 2016).

I point this out because if the professoriate refuses to cultivate some modicum of humility among our student bodies, I have less hope that we can look to institutional leadership to robustly assume the task. If the first law of nature, as Samuel Butler claimed, is self-preservation, executive leaders may well commit their resources to following the money and increasingly commodify the academe, especially as competition for quality students becomes increasingly intense. One cannot fail to be impressed as well as worried at how especially elite research universities have become black holes for money. To recruit academically superior and financially able students, universities must have the best instructors, who will demand the best laboratories and resources as well as hefty salaries. But these students and their families will likely also demand “a wider array of services, from health care, extracurricular activities, police safety, varied dining service, sports facilities, housing opportunities, career and personal counseling and technological support” (Jaschik, 2010; Keenan, 2015, p. 174).

So, on the one hand, I only wish to point out how easy it is to imagine a university’s leadership committing their resources to these “commodifying” projects rather than pondering the complexities of character formation. But on

the other hand, if intellectual humility connotes a respect for logical thinking, evidentially driven decision making, learning how to distinguish good evidence from bad, and maintaining a respect for the knowledge and perspectives of others, it seems unthinkable that the professorial majority would deny those values. Notice, too, that characterizing intellectual humility in these ways rescues it from the postmodernist denial of compelling meta-narratives of prescriptive morality. Intellectual humility instead underlines the value of rationality over fallacy, knowledge over ignorance, good evidence over bad, and tolerating other perspectives and voices—again, items that any instructor would or should value.

But recalling Tangney’s observation that authentic humility is rare and perhaps antithetical to human nature, developing a feel for “teaching” intellectual humility in the classroom might require years of effort. Nevertheless, faculty who acknowledge its importance, and I believe most do, should role-model and champion its value; take ample opportunity to popularize the notion on their campuses and among their peers; and impress the next generation of society’s leaders with its manifestations and critical importance. Failing to do so, especially given the ways contemporary voices of arrogance, sophistry, and misinformation have proven appallingly successful among large sectors of the American electorate, may consign us to being “victims of democracy” for a very long time.

Acknowledgment: This article was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

REFERENCES

- Banja, J. (2005). *Medical errors and medical narcissism*. Jones & Bartlett.
- Bergman, J. Z., Westerman, J. W., & Daly, J. (2010). Narcissism in management education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 9(1), 119–131.
- Davis, D. E., Rice, K., McElroy, S., DeBlare, C., Choe, E., Van Tongeren, D. R., & Hook, J. N. (2016). Distinguishing intellectual humility and general humility. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(3), 215–224.
- Hassett, K. A. (2009, February 17). Harvard narcissists with MBAs killed Wall Street. *Bloomberg*. <http://www.aei.org/publication/harvard-narcissists-with-mbas-killed-wall-street/>
- Jaschik, S. (2010, October 25). Commodification of academic research. *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/10/25/commodification-academic-research>
- Keenan, J. F. (2015). *University ethics*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Leight, E. (2018, July 17). ‘Robin Williams: come inside my mind’: 10 things we learned from new doc. *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/robin-williams-come-inside-my-mind-10-things-we-learned-from-new-doc-699519/>
- Lynch, M. P. (2017, June 5). Teaching humility in an age of arrogance. *The Chronicle Review*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Teaching-Humility-in-an-Age-of/240266>
- Millon, T. (1996). *Disorders of personality: DSM-IV and beyond*. Wiley.
- Ou, A. Y., Tsui, A. S., Kinicki, A. J., Waldman, D. A., Xiao, Z., & Song, L. J. (2014). Humble chief executive officers’ connections to top management team integration and middle managers’ responses. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 59(1), 34–72.
- Owens, B. P., Johnson, M. D., & Mitchell, T. R. (2013). Expressed humility in organizations: Implications for performance, teams and leadership. *Organization Science*, 24(5), 1517–1538.
- Paul, R. (2000). Critical thinking, moral integrity, and citizenship: Teaching for the intellectual virtues. In G. Axtell (Ed.), *Knowledge, belief and character: Readings in virtue epistemology* (pp. 163–175). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Robinson, J. A., & Glanzer, P. L. (2016). How students’ expectations shape their quest for purpose during college. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 53(1), 1–12.
- Shulman, L.S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 1–22.
- Tangney, J. P. (2000). Humility: Theoretical perspectives, empirical findings and directions for

- future research. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19(1), 70–82.
- Tangney, J. P. (2009). Humility. In S. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 483–490). Oxford University Press.
- Trigwell, K., & Shale, S. (2004). Student learning and the scholarship of university teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(4), 523–536.
- Twenge, J. M. (2013). Does online social media lead to social connection or social disconnection? *Journal of College & Character*, 14(1), 11–20.
- Webber, R. (2016, September 5). Meet the real narcissists (they're not what you think). *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201609/meet-the-real-narcissists-theyre-not-what-you-think>
- Westerman, J. W., Bergman, J. Z., Bergman, S. M., & Daly, J. P. (2012). Are universities creating millennial narcissistic employees? An empirical examination of narcissism in business students and its implications. *Journal of Management Education*, 36(1), 5–32.
- Wetzel, E., Brown, A., Hill, P. L., Chung, J. M., Robins, R. W., & Roberts, B. W. (2017). The narcissism epidemic is dead; Long live the narcissism epidemic. *Psychological Science*, 28(12), 1833–1847.