Is Humility a Sentiment?

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Abstract

Gervais and Fessler reintroduce the concept of a sentiment as a framework for conceptualizing contempt, a construct with both attitudinal and emotional components. We propose that humility might also fit this mold. We review recent findings regarding the antecedents, phenomenology, and functional consequences of humility, and discuss why conceptualizing it as a sentiment may advance our understanding of this construct.

Is Humility a Sentiment?

Gervais and Fessler hearken back to the formative years of social psychology to make a strong case for resuscitating the concept of *sentiment*, or "a functional network of discrete emotions moderated across situations by an attitudinal representation of another person" (p. 9). We applaud their effort, and expect it to help bridge the largely disparate literatures on attitudes and emotions. Although it may be pragmatic for scientists to conceptualize constructs as primarily attitudinal or emotional—and carve out corresponding niches in circumscribed academic subfields—ample evidence suggests that many constructs involve components of both. For example, feelings-as-information theory suggests that individuals rely on momentary affect when making attitude-like evaluations (Schwarz, 2010), and functionalist models of distinct emotions often explicitly incorporate attitude-like evaluations of the self and others as necessary pre-requisites for certain emotional experiences (e.g., Tracy & Robins, 2004; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Smith, & Cikara 2015).

Gervais and Fessler propose a provisional set of sentiments that might serve unique social affordances (i.e., love, liking, respect, hate, fear; p. 27). We would add another construct to this list—one that also does not fit well with current models of emotions or attitudes: *humility*. Like contempt, humility does not meet the standard criteria to be considered a basic emotion (Ekman, 1992); for example, it lacks a cross-culturally recognizable nonverbal expression, distinct physiological signature, and evidence of manifestation in any non-human species. However, also like contempt, humility is clearly an affective experience (Saroglou, Buxtant, & Tilquin, 2008), and is characterized by several features typically used to define emotions (Izard, 2010), including

antecedent cognitive appraisals (i.e., accurate evaluation of one's abilities) and activation of distinct cognitive-behavioral patterns (i.e., directing one's attention toward others and their accomplishments; Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Tangney, 2000). Yet, alongside these emotion-like qualities, humility exhibits several features more characteristic of attitudes: it is thought to be a relatively enduring quality of persons (e.g., Kesebir, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and is considered by some to be a judgment, comprised of cognitive content at least as much as affective (Davis, Worthington, Jr., & Hook, 2010).

Adding to this complexity, we recently found converging evidence across a series of studies examining lay experiences and semantic conceptualizations, as well as experts' reports, that humility is experienced in two distinct forms, each of which involves both emotional and attitudinal features (Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, 2016). The first of these, which we labeled *appreciative humility* based on its most representative feelings and thoughts, typically follows personal success; is associated with compassion, grace, and understanding; traits like high self-esteem, status, and agreeableness; and motivates a behavioral orientation toward celebrating others. The second form, labeled *self-abasing humility*, is more likely to follow personal failures; and is associated with feelings of submissiveness, unimportance, and worthlessness; traits like low self-esteem and introversion; and motivates a behavioral orientation toward hiding from others.

In light of this complexity, how *should* humility be understood? To date, researchers have reached little consensus; humility has variously been described as a relationship-specific personality judgment (Davis et al., 2010), a personality trait (Kesebir, 2014), a hypoegoic state

(Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014), an emotion (Saroglou et al., 2008), spiritual intelligence (Emmons, 1999), an accurate assessment of one's abilities (Tangney, 2000), and a virtue (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the face of such disparate conceptualizations, the concept of *sentiment* could prove useful. Consistent with the first major component of Gervais and Fessler's definition, each form of humility involves several narrower distinct emotional experiences; for appreciative humility these include authentic pride and gratitude; for self-abasing humility they include shame and embarrassment. Consistent with another major component of Gervais and Fessler's *sentiment*, each form of humility involves the adoption of a particular attitude toward a person. Episodes of appreciative humility promote a sense of appreciation toward others' accomplishments and a desire to connect with those individuals. Self-abasing humility also fosters an attitude toward a person, but, interestingly, that person is oneself. Indeed, this form of humility leads individuals to view themselves as unimportant, unintelligent, and incompetent, all of which reflect a negative attitudinal self-evaluation. If humility is a sentiment, this last finding suggests that sentiments can involve attitudinal representations of either another person *or* the self, suggesting a possible amendment to Gervais and Fessler's definition.

Conceptualizing humility as a sentiment may befit a much needed more nuanced understanding of the construct. To date, humility has been portrayed as a universally positive characteristic, with wide ranging and somewhat disparate effects, such as attenuating death anxiety (Kesebir, 2014), reinforcing gratitude (Kruse et al., 2014), fostering forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013), promoting prosocial behavior (Exline & Hill, 2012; LaBouff et al., 2012), buffering against stress (Krause et al., 2016), and facilitating self-control (Tong et al., 2016). These findings likely

result from the aforementioned contrasting conceptualizations of humility, and the fact that most researchers view humility as uniformly positive but do not specify what, exactly, it is (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). To date, these findings have not been integrated into a comprehensive theoretical model, leading to the conclusion that humility simply promotes a grab-bag of desirable outcomes. Yet it is not immediately clear why existential anxiety and gratitude—two entirely distinct emotional processes—would both be influenced by humility. Similarly, why would humility lead to both prosociality and increased self-control, given that the former requires focusing on others whereas the latter involves focusing on (and withstanding) one's own desires? Crucially, conceptualizing humility as a sentiment could prompt researchers to move beyond viewing the construct as broadly and uni-dimensionally positive, toward building a more nuanced theory, as Gervais and Fessler have done for contempt (see Figure 1). This, in turn, might generate specific predictions regarding the elicitors, phenomenology, and functional consequences of humility.

In closing, we appreciate Gervais and Fessler's attempt to integrate constructs with both attitudinal and emotional components under the rubric of a sentiment, and believe it may foster novel insights into certain constructs that have defied proper classification—like contempt and humility.

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