

“A new culture of humility? – Virtues and the progress of society”

“Humility was the key to success for Germany” (“Demut war der Schlüssel zum deutschen Erfolg”) was the front-page headline of “Die Zeit” after Germany had won the 2014 FIFA World Cup championship.¹ The gestures of the German team after their 7:1 victory against Brazil touched the world: It was not elation, but Philipp Lahm’s gesture as he leaned down to console a Brazilian player. Humility – a contemporary virtue that paves the road to victory, if you want to believe the headlines.

Humility is a virtue that is experiencing a renaissance – not only in (German) football, but also during the recent banking and financial crisis. It is one of the key virtues demanded from the protagonists in the economic sector in their efforts to avoid a recurrence of a crisis. Ironically even the German CEO of Goldman Sachs, Alexander Dibelius, called upon his contemporaries in his field of industries to act in “collective humility“, to oppose the “self-possessed behaviour” of bankers and managers, “which is totally out of touch with reality”.²

Humility is a virtue that stems from the Christian tradition and it is pleasing to find this Christian attitude so widely spread in secular society. But frequently this re-emergence of “humility” tempts church and theology to claim humility as a “religious virtue” and thereby legitimating Christianity by its virtues and values.

However, the picture of the German and the Brazilian football player reveals an ambiguity: Philipp Lahm bending down may indeed be a humble gesture – but for this gesture to take place the Brazilian team had to face a defeat by the German team which left the Brazilians humiliated. Despite the new popularity of humility, this ambiguity should lead theology to err on the side of caution when propagating humility. Nevertheless: Due to its complexity humility can be a prime example for dealing with virtues from a Christian point of view. In my presentation at first I will consider to what extent humility can be thought of as a virtue in an Aristotelian notion and how we should reflect on the specifications of humility as a virtue. In an interlude I will then consider II) the limitations and possibilities of a virtue ethical approach with regard to humility in the 21st century, which will then lead to the discussion what the religious stance on humility could contribute to the ethical discussion on virtues.

¹ Cathrin Gilbert, Nach dem WM-Titel. Große Kunst. Demut war der Schlüssel zum deutschen Erfolg, in: Die Zeit 30, 17.07.2014, 1.

² Original: “kollektiver Demut”, “selbstbezogene und realitätsfremde Verhalten” in: Spiegel Online, Finanzkrise: Goldman-Sachs-Chef fordert kollektive Demut seiner Branche (03.05.2009), in: <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/finanzkrise-goldman-sachs-chef-fordert-kollektive-demut-seiner-Branche-a-622504.html>, accessed 27.08.2014.

In preparing my paper I decided to change the title: In the first version I talked about humility as a *religious* virtue – simply assuming that humility was such a religious virtue. During my preparations this turned out to be the problem rather than an initial assumption.

I Humility as an Aristotelian virtue

But initially I will analyse humility as an ethical virtue. If we are talking about ethics we have to look at Aristotle, even though Aristotle himself never includes humility in his catalogue of virtues but focuses on more heroic virtues.

Aristotle defines virtues in the Third Book of the Nicomachean Ethics as follows: “We have now discussed in outline the virtues in general, having indicated their genus, (namely, that it is a mean [in regard to two extremes, KO] and a disposition), and having shown that they render us apt to do the same actions as those by which they are produced, and to do them in the way in which right reason may enjoin; and that they depend on ourselves [that they are in our power, KO] and are voluntary”.³

Aristotle’s basic definition of a virtue is that it is a mean between two extremes, “one of excess and the other of defect.”⁴ For example, “courage” is the mean between fear and audacity.⁵ Aristotle further argues: “Yet to what degree and how seriously a man must err to be blamed is not easy to define on principle”.⁶ Virtues therefore are not static, but they are “in motion” and always in search of a balanced position in the golden mean. This motion must be endured, as “one should lean sometimes to the side of excess and sometimes to that of deficiency, since this is the easiest way of hitting the mean and the right course.”⁷

In regard to humility we now need to determine the two extremes between which “humility” has to find a balanced mean. Conventionally these are described as the phenomenon of pride on the one hand and humiliation (or degradation) on the other hand. In the Christian tradition and in accordance with Augustine “pride” (*superbia*) has fallen under critique, while humility became favourable, a problematic development that often lead to humiliation and degradation in the history of the Church.

On the basis of Aristotle I propose, taking of both psychological and sociological aspects into account, to describe humility as an attitude coping with imbalances of power. Hence I would like to suggest that humility is situated between (absolute) power and powerlessness.

³ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1114b, 21f, transl. by H. Rackham, Cambridge/London 1994, 153.

⁴ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1109a, 23, transl. by H. Rackham, Cambridge/London 1994, 110.

⁵ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1109a, transl. by H. Rackham, Cambridge/London 1994, 109f.

⁶ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1109b, 20f, transl. by H. Rackham, Cambridge/London 1994, 113.

⁷ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1109b, 24, transl. by H. Rackham, Cambridge/London 1994, 115.

“Power” in itself is a neutral term. In everyday interactions in which humility unfolds, power imbalances simply exist, but do not necessarily lead to humiliation:⁸ For example, in interactions between a medical professional and patient, teachers and pupils or parents and children. Such imbalances of power have to be transformed into everyday interaction without causing experiences of distress and powerlessness. If the interaction succeeds, the imbalance of power can even be transcended – just imagine a parent bending down to their child to meet the child literally “at eye level”.

But this significant picture of bending down also illustrates why humility can so easily turn into humiliation: Bowing down is the embodiment of humility – and the very moment humility is expressed in such an action, the hitherto invisible power imbalances become visible. Only the more powerful person (the person who is higher up) can bend down. This exposure and visibility of the power gradient opens two possible outcomes: It can transform the imbalance of power (into an encounter at eye level) *or* it can increase the imbalance up to the point of humiliation. To prevent such an increase of imbalance and humiliation it is an integral part of acting humbly to be aware of and to accept my own position in a power structure in a self-confident and self-reflective manner. For if I mistake my own position it might increase the imbalance: as long as I am not aware of my own “superiority” I may happen to debase someone else. Incidentally, if you remember the beginning of my presentation, this might have been what happened when the German football team corrupted their reputation of being humble by debasing the Argentinian players in their display of the “Gaucho-Dance”. Thus humility requires an accurate awareness of one’s own position in a power structure to find a balanced mean between two extremes and thus to match the first definition of a virtue as given by Aristotle.

There is a second argument by Aristotle. He defines virtues as “dispositions” or a “states of character” “that render us apt to do the same actions as those by which they are produced”. Virtues prove themselves in particular cases and tangible situations. But they have to be consolidated by experiencing these situations again and again until they can be expected at any time from a person, if this person is to be called “virtuous” in the Aristotelian notion. Virtues, therefore, cannot be claimed ad hoc to solve a current crisis and thus they cannot be utilized.

By defining virtues as personal characteristics we dispel the misunderstanding of virtues as being merely functional. Yet, even then, a paradox remains: “True” humility that transcends and transforms power structures, cannot be a deliberate act – as it would insert power imbalances even into an encounter “at eye level”. Humility would be lost the very moment I choose

⁸ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Macht und Gewalt*, München²³2013, 52f.

to be humble. In this regard humility is always an act “out-of-character”.⁹ This description, that humble acts can neither be deliberate nor utilized, is already present in the German term “Demut” as established by Martin Luther, who provided its prevalent use. In his exegesis of the “Magnificat” Luther reinterprets the functional, monastic praxis of humility and concludes: when a person is truly humble, they know nothing of their own humility.¹⁰ Humility is not so much a state of character as rather a description of the (life-long) search for such a state. This description (the name of the virtue) enforces interpretation and action that in turn lead to a continued understanding of what humility can entail.

II) Is being humble in our power? An interlude on virtue ethics

We have now reached the following, first definition: Humility is a life-long search for a balance between power and powerlessness and as such a concept that is ambiguous in itself. Let me present you a short interlude on what this example of humility can mean for virtue ethics.

Firstly: how does this consideration agree with the Aristotelian definition that virtues are “in our power”? Can this be applied to humility? As said above one cannot expose the moment an act is humble and virtuous – it is not “in our power”. Hence, as valuable as Aristotle has proven to be for the examination of humility as a virtue, present day virtue ethics have to go beyond Aristotle.

The first approach I will briefly touch on is the prominent re-evaluation of Aristotelian virtues by Martha Nussbaum. In re-reading Aristotle she defines virtues as a way of handling human experiences by “introducing the virtue name as the name (as yet undefined) of whatever it is to choose appropriately in that area of experience.”¹¹ To describe a tangible action in a specific context is to argue about the “competing specifications” of the respective virtues.¹² Since humility is the continued search for a mean it is an apt expression of the fragile balance necessary for “a good life”.¹³

A second approach is to include psychological aspects and theories of emotions in virtue ethics. For example, Christoph Halbig states that virtue ethics have failed for structural reasons as they cannot cope with what is demanded from them. Since virtues cannot be ends and cannot be functionalised, they need to be relieved of the burden of virtue ethics. Further, the

⁹ Cf., Christoph Halbig, *Der Begriff der Tugend und die Grenzen der Tugendethik* (stw 2081), Berlin 2013, 60f.

¹⁰ Dass „der mensch nimmer weniger von der demut weisz, denn ebenn wenn er recht demütig ist”, Martin Luther, *Das Magnificat verdeutscht und ausgelegt* (1521), WA 7, 560, 10–12.

¹¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, Non-relative virtues. An Aristotelian Approach, in: Russ Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Ethical Theory an Anthology*, 630-644; 633.

¹² Martha C. Nussbaum, Non-relative virtues. An Aristotelian Approach, in: Russ Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Ethical Theory an Anthology*, 630-644; 633.

¹³ Cf. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge 2001.

rehabilitation of virtues can only succeed if individual psychological and socio-psychological findings are taken into consideration.¹⁴ In the same notion, but from a theological point of view, Roderich Barth analyses humility in accordance with theories of emotions.¹⁵

It makes a lot of sense to refer to emotional aspects when discussing virtues, as we have learned in late modernity that most human actions are constituted by emotional factors. Yet, the discourse of theories of emotions does not and cannot replace the demand for an analysis of different models and images of how to cope with power structures. Hence, as a third approach, I will take into consideration how such a model, an image of a power structure might both enhance and shape our understanding of humility.

III Humility and omnipotence

I would like to expand this thought and go further into detail by evaluating a term for such a model in the Christian language, a term which is both prominent and problematic: God's "omnipotence". "Omnipotence" is the term for a model dealing with power structures that is as complex as humility (at least): The concept of God itself includes a power structure that incorporates its own counterpart. Traditionally one might phrase it like this: God's omnipotence proves true in its extreme contrast, the absolute powerlessness of Jesus on the cross. And these two extremes, the absolute omnipotence of God and the absolute powerlessness of the cross have both positive and negative connotations: On the one hand omnipotence is linked with providence and the act of God as creator – and on the other hand, since modern times, omnipotence has been bound to the issue of God's actions in the face of suffering and evil, even leading to the image of a sadistic God, who permits such evil. This development might be the reason why some wish to eliminate both omnipotence and humility from present day theology. Likewise, on the one hand the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross shows his ultimate degradation and ineffectiveness in the face of death when he cries: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27,46) But on the other hand it is strongly associated with the image of absolute devotion and a dedication that finally leads to salvation. Hence the concept of God's omnipotence implies the concept of a power structure that can neither be defined nor precisely put into words.

This in turn establishes humility as *epistemologically* out of reach – and not only out of reach with regard to an act or as an attitude. Let me explain: Humility in a religious notion

¹⁴ Cf. Christoph Halbig, *Der Begriff der Tugend und die Grenzen der Tugendethik* (stw 2081), Berlin 2013, 352.

¹⁵ Cf. Roderich Barth, *Die Dialektik der Demut. Emotionstheoretische Überlegungen zu einer christlichen Tugend*, bisher unveröffentlichtes Manuskript der Antrittsvorlesung von Prof. Dr. Roderich Barth, Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, 5. Juni 2014.

can be seen the embodiment of omnipotence. And as mentioned above, the extremes (God's absolute power and God's powerlessness) are neither distinct nor comprehensible. And this inability to identify the extremes shows that we are incapable of finding a balance with regard to these two extremes: I can neither relate to the experience of absolute power nor to the experience of absolute powerlessness (in death) and I cannot even begin to imagine these two extremes as a unity. Figuratively speaking: God's omnipotence is so omnipotent that it inevitably forces me to go down on my knees – but this force is so absolute that I may remain upright as well.

The complexity of the figuration of omnipotence and of being humble is reflected in biblical narrations, such as Christ's Temptation in the wilderness. (Mt 4,1-11 par Lk 4,1-13). The three temptations reach their literal high in the encounter on the mountain and the offer of the devil to grant Jesus a power, which is as powerful as all the power of the kingdoms of the world combined – that is, if Jesus bows down in a gesture of powerlessness and subordination in front of the devil and worships him. Jesus declines this offer referring to God's absoluteness (and thus his omnipotence). Jesus remains *upright* and therefore expresses his humility. In the composition of the gospel of Matthew this theme of high and low intensifies: Jesus refuses power *high* upon a mountain, which leads to his (seemingly) absolute powerlessness *high* upon the cross, which the reader has to endure until the very last paragraph of the gospel, in which Jesus reveals again *high* upon a mountain, what his abdication of power and powerlessness truly mean: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Mt 28,18b) And this absolute power, which Jesus has, is not distinct as it encompasses both the abdication of power and powerlessness. Likewise, in the narrative logic of Matthew's gospel, Jesus' humility or his partaking in God's omnipotence neither entitles him to any certain kind of behaviour nor can a specific kind of behaviour be expected of him.

Let me conclude: This example of the Christian attitude of humility and the Christian figuration of omnipotence points out: Religion is not only praxis but teaches us how to think. If theology participates in philosophical discourses and has its place in society, this implies: The task of theology is not limited to translating philosophical concepts into Christian figures of thought and to applying philosophical structures to Christian tradition. But rather, in a philosophically and theologically reflected occupation with religious attitudes and habits, such as humility, and figurations, such as omnipotence, certain aspects can be found, that are not evident in the philosophical discourse. And only in this regard can religion and its virtues play a part in the progress of society: Not by claiming these virtues in accordance with secular media and institutions – for example, by asking bankers and managers to be humble. Rather, religion

offers a new perception of virtues such as humility. A new perception, that stems from a reflected examination of Christian figurations such as omnipotence and of Christian practices such as humility. And the findings of these examinations can then be incorporated into the current discourse – for example in the reflection on virtue ethics.

Finally, I hope that I could show you that humility and omnipotence are rather intriguing examples, because neither is neat or simple, but from a historical and a theological point of view they are rather obscure and interesting. The examination of omnipotence and humility is worthwhile, because they are complex. And this might even indicate, that other, seemingly “simpler” religious virtues face the same ambiguity and therefore should not be functionalised – for example to reduce complexity in times of crises. A humble Christian religion could accept and depict its own powerlessness in the light of crises – while at the same time confidently pointing to its own inventory of narrations and figurations that have proved to offer ways of raising the complexity of power structures, to handle them and to endure them.

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