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Review of *Kant and the Ethics of Humility: A Story of Dependence, Corruption and Virtue* by Jeanine Grenberg

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## Book Review

# *Kant and the Ethics of Humility: A Story of Dependence, Corruption and Virtue*, by Jeanine Grenberg

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Jeanine Grenberg's carefully crafted case in defense of humility as a central human virtue starts (Chapter 1) with an account of Kantian rational agency in which dependency and corruption mark fundamental limits to human moral capacities. She then offers a general picture of a Kantian theory of virtue (Chapters 2 and 3) that is consonant with this construal of moral agency as dependent and corrupt. Grenberg notes that her Kantian based view involves at least one important contrast with Aristotelian theories—rather than understanding virtues primarily in terms of excellences, a “Kantian approach to virtue is . . . in part necessarily ameliorative” (p. 79)—but she also argues for important parallels. These include both a counterpart to Aristotelian character traits, articulated in a Kantian understanding of virtues as principled, and a Kantian thesis on behalf of the unity of the virtues. Grenberg then offers (Chapter 4) an analysis and response to recent accounts of humility (e.g., by Stephen

Hare, Norvin Richards, G. F. Scheuler, David Statman) to which her basic objection is that they “have generally rejected any appeal to human nature to ground the state [of humility]” and, in so doing, have turned to a “behavioristic definition of humility” that relies “upon self-other comparison as a standard for self-evaluation” (p. 111). Her constructive account of “the Kantian virtue of humility” (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) treats it as “that meta-attitude which constitutes the moral agent’s proper perspective on herself as a dependent and corrupt but capable and dignified rational agent” (p. 133). A principal concern in this account is to provide, through appeal to Kantian notions of interest, moral feeling, and respect, a plausible alternative to “the comparative-competitive model of humility.” In spelling out this alternative, Grenberg advances theses about the ways in which humility and a proper self-respect regarding one’s own moral agency mutually condition each other and argues, in addition, for taking moral exemplars to have a more important function for moral growth and education than is typically associated with Kant’s views. Grenberg then concludes her case by exploring (Chapters 8 and 9) “humility’s relation to the obligatory end of perfection of self” and “how humility is relevant to the obligatory end [i.e., beneficence] relative to others” (p. 217).

There are at least three levels on which Grenberg’s work provides bases for significant engagement. First, it can be engaged as an exercise in virtue ethics that, by its own enactment of a modestly advanced and gently persuasive case, not only brings humility back from the margins of discussion, but also suggests that its restoration to a more central place in the life of the virtues is of considerable importance for truthfully undertaking the moral responsibilities we have to ourselves and to one another. Second, it can be engaged as an exercise in Kant interpretation that challenges once widely accepted views that placed an almost unbridgeable chasm between Kantian ethics as deontological and most forms of virtue ethics. Third, it can be engaged as an exercise in moral anthropology (or a moral ontology of human agency) which opens lines of potentially useful conversation with theological ethics and theological anthropology. A remark about the first level will serve as introduction to comments about the other two; the pivotal point of engagement in all of these is Grenberg’s commitment, for which I am in full sympathy, to provide an “account

of humility [that] will not abandon questions of human nature" (p. 111).

Both a sense of self-respect that is not keyed to comparison with others and a mutually supportive relationship between self-respect and respect for others are key elements in Grenberg's construal of humility as a Kantian virtue. She puts both points to effective use in her necessarily compact treatment (Chapters 8 and 9) of the two main divisions of what Kant terms "the duties of virtue," viz., duties to oneself and duties to others. Her engagement with these points through illustrative use of Cordelia from *King Lear* and Alyosha from *The Brother Karamazov* shows great sensitivity to the complexity of the human social relationships in which humility needs to function. The latter example—Alyosha's abortive attempt to make amends to Snegirev for the public insult inflicted on him by Alyosha's brother Dmitri—takes cognizance of the fact that matters of social status and disparity of power distort both Alyosha's and Snegirev's reading of what the situation demands morally in terms of both their own self-respect and their respect for one another. Though both are eventually able to correct their prior distorted judgments (discussed in detail on pp. 243–50) so as to act toward each other in accord with the "humble beneficence" of moral equals, Grenberg's account does not raise the questions of whether or how humility in its Kantian guise provides any purchase from which a moral agent might address the structural social disparities that cloud proper recognition of one another as moral equals. My suspicion is that there may be useful resources in Grenberg's construal of Kantian moral agency and in her mutual referencing of self-respect *and* respect for others to the "untrumpable value of moral principles" (p. 161) that open possibilities for dealing with such structural issues. It may also be the case that both identifying and utilizing those resources will require addressing the larger issues that arise in bringing an ethics of virtue to bear upon the dynamics of shaping just structures for human society—issues that can be posed in Kantian terms as the task of exhibiting more explicitly what constitutes the unity of the moral demands articulated in a "doctrine of right" with those articulated in a "doctrine of virtue" in an account of moral agency.

This consideration about the mutual relation of self-respect and respect for others within the unity of human moral agency is relevant to the two other levels on which Grenberg's work deserves thoughtful engagement. It is no longer surprising to see an interpretation of Kant's ethics in which concepts once taken to be outside the scope of his intense focus on right, duty and the autonomous exercise of human freedom—e.g., teleology, character, and virtue—are reintroduced as important coordinates within his moral theory. Within the context of such "revisionist" readings of Kant's ethics, Grenberg's particular contribution does not lie simply in its effort to provide a detailed case for taking Kant as both as an important point of reference for general discussions of virtue and as insightful expositor of the principles that inform a morally rich concept of humility. Of at least equal importance in my judgment is her affirmation that an account of human agency that is conceptually and morally adequate needs to be referenced to an understanding of human nature that is not merely empirical and behavioral. Grenberg's interpretation is thus consonant with renewed interest a number of Kant interpreters have recently taken in the role that anthropology plays in Kant's critical project. It further suggests that any answer to the question of the unity of the "doctrine of right" and the "doctrine of virtue" will, of necessity, require an account of the human subject/agent as the locus in which the unity of finite, embodied reason is constituted.

This brings us full circle back to Grenberg's starting point in Kant's account of finite human rational agency as dependent and corrupt that is given its most notable exposition in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. She articulates that account as "a general claim about the human condition: human beings are desiring and needy beings who tend in a whole variety of ways to value the self improperly relative to other objects of moral value" (p. 48). In a manner that is faithful to Kant's own careful parsing of the differences between the moral and the religious and between the philosophical and the theological, Grenberg tries to provide "a philosophically respectable, and not necessarily religious, account of a transcendent standard, and the limits of human nature in the face of it" as the context in which to make the case for the centrality of humility for a virtuous human life (p. 140). This careful eschewing of paths that lead

to the theological—a move that allows affirmation of a “secular (at times gentler), but always radical evil”—respects the a-theological (and even anti-theological) perspectives informing many of the interlocutors her work explicitly engages (p. 42).

I hope, however, that this is does not become the end of Grenberg’s “story of dependence, corruption and virtue,” because there is reason to think that her work offers something of value for the project of constructing philosophical and theological anthropologies that can reckon with the fractured aftermath of modernity. Grenberg makes a promising start in the direction of providing what Charles Taylor calls an “anthropology of situated freedom” (*Sources of the Self*, p. 515) in her depiction of “the challenge of the human condition” as “the task of learning to love the self well, that is to love the self in a way that does not undermine our equally inherent end of being moral” (p. 48). The theological crux here, of course, is the extent to which such a properly ordered love of self is only possible in view of first being loved by God.