

THE RATIONALITY OF HUMILITY

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Abstract. In this paper I explore humility as a paradigm, with reference to recent debates over the morality and rationality of emotions, and to the relation between religion and emotion. In Ancient Greek ethics, humility did not yet play a role; with the rise of Christianity, however, it becomes one of the cardinal virtues – only to disappear again with the onset of modernity. Against a culture-pessimistic interpretation of this development, this article begins by characterising the relation between virtue and emotion, before reconstructing the inner rationality of humility and showing how it can be traced through several transformations to a modern ethics of responsibility. Against this background, possible manifestations of the humble attitude in the present are made plausible.

I. THE DEBATE ABOUT THE MORALITY OF FEELINGS

Recently, the debate about emotions has grown to such an extent that an overview has become difficult. It covers not only different areas of philosophy, but also neuro-, social and cultural sciences.¹ However, the so-called *emotional turn* already took place in the last two decades of the 20th century. Since the turn of the millennium, the number of publications about the topic has also significantly increased in continental Europe. Predecessors of this debate in the Anglo-Saxon language area reach back even further. Those beginnings – such as Anthony Kenny's 1963

¹ The publication database of the Freie Universität Berlin's interdisciplinary research cluster 'Languages of Emotion' provides a good overview, available at: <<http://www.loe.fu-berlin.de/zentrum/publikationen/datenbank/index.html>> [accessed 19/07/2014].

study *Action, Emotion and Will*² – and the further course of the debate show that moral questions are a central motif for the re-evaluation of emotions. But the new approach to emotions was not supposed to merely be a revival of traditional views within sentimentalism, such as Adam Smith's and David Hume's moral sense philosophy. The point is rather nothing less than a 'fundamentally new approach to construing normative-ethical theories'.³

The reason why a simple return to the classics of sentimentalism has been impossible, even for analytical philosophers, is the long shadow of Kant's ethics. The fact is often overlooked, although it was critical for the formation of his practical philosophy, that Kant himself had sympathies for sentimentalism in the time prior to his critiques. Intense consideration of Francis Hutcheson's moral sense led him to the well thought-out belief that objective and universal norms could never be justified by reference to moral feelings.⁴ Only after this discussion did Kant uncompromisingly turn towards justifying ethics by pure and practical reason. According to this tradition, norms or the ethical quality of actions can only be justified by reference to distinctly rational *reasons*.⁵ Of course, Kant's conception of reason was often modified and expanded in modernity. Nevertheless, modern ethical discourse is determined by the rational justification of good reasons. Theological contributions to current socio-political questions also rarely refer directly to their religious traditions, but rather defend those rational arguments whose conformity with those traditions one hopes to show.

The reference to justifying reasons, however, notoriously leaves a problem unanswered: knowing the good reasons for a certain choice of action does not at all mean that – to use Kant's terminology – this knowledge could also determine our will. In modern ethics this is also called the problem of motivation in deontology. How can justifying reasons also, as factual motives, determine a possible action's agent?

² Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994) (Reprint of the 1963 Edition).

³ Sabine A. Döring, 'Die Moralität der Gefühle. Eine Art Einleitung', in *Die Moralität der Gefühle*, ed. by Döring / Verena Mayer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), pp. 15–35 (p. 15).

⁴ Cf. Dieter Henrich, 'Hutcheson und Kant', in *Kant-Studien*, 49 (1957/58), 49–69.

⁵ For the classical debate about the status of reasons, cf. Donald Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (1963), 685–700; Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1971).

This problem has not only led to an often anti-Kantian renaissance of virtue ethics,⁶ but also to a renewed interest in the emotions. The precise advantage of classical sentimentalism, with its justification of moral actions, was that it also provided a veritable motivation to act. However, if this advantage is to be saved against rationalistic objections of Kantian provenance, a new conception of emotions is necessary. The basic thesis of recent theories of emotions is therefore: emotions are not the irrational awareness of subjective states – as many classical theories of emotions have suggested, that are now subsumed under the label *theories of feelings*. Instead, emotions have their own form of rationality. The latter is characterized by intentionality and representationality. Emotions are not only directed towards objects, but they also represent or evaluate them in a certain way.

According to this roughly cognitivist conception, emotions are comparable to perceptions or evaluations. Consequently, the recent debate about emotions also leaves room for discussing the epistemic status and the meaning of values.⁷ The advantage with respect to the aforementioned moral dilemma is that we can now attribute a form of rationality or intelligence to motivational emotions – even an emotionally caused weakness of will. This basically means that, given a certain object or situation, emotions can be appropriate or inappropriate. If we could also state criteria for appropriateness, emotional evaluations could indeed be acknowledged as rational reasons for actions. In this sense, emotions would be good reasons and, at the same time, strong motives.

In the re-evaluation of the role of emotions in human life that took place in neuro sciences, philosophy and cultural studies, one area has been mostly neglected. Since the question whether there are qualitatively specific religious feelings at all is controversial, this area can be described more carefully as follows: it concerns the relationship between religion and feelings. It should be uncontroversial that we can refer to religion here, since religion is a centuries-old culture of feelings and expressions that are reflected in the doctrine of affections and social teaching. In what follows, I therefore want to investigate this relationship by means of the example of humility. In a first step, I will justify why humility seems to me to be a suitable example.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁷ Cf. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. by Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 475–613.

II. THE VARIED HISTORY OF HUMILITY

For this purpose, I want to employ a narrative that can often be encountered in relation to the concept of humility, although historical research is, with good reasons, working on polishing some of its edges. According to this well-known narrative, humility marks an important break in the history of Western ethics. In a slight exaggeration, we might say that humility is still unknown in Greek ethics. In antiquity, the lexemes *tapeinos/tapeinophrosune* that were then continued, by mediation of the Latin *humilis/humilitas*, as the English term *humility*, were used as *negative* predicates. However, with the rapid rise of Christianity in the ancient world, humility quickly became the epitome of morality.⁸ Humility cannot be found next to justice, bravery, moderation and wisdom in pre-Christian catalogues of virtues. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, he warns us that our verbal expressions should be clear, but by no means *tapeinos*, i.e. ignoble or commonplace.⁹ With Origen, by contrast, humility has already risen to be one of the cardinal virtues. It is even praised as the fundamental virtue from which all other virtues stem. Parallel to this development of humility into a cardinal virtue, it also turns, as it were, into the epitome of the Christian conduct of life. The focal point for this is the monastic form of life, the class of the perfected ones, in whose growing regulation humility is structured into steps of inner and outer self-humiliating asceticism – from a submissive poise to the absolute obedience towards even obvious caprice of the superior. In this epoch, Augustine summed up his deep theology of humility and, at the same time, reshaped it into a theology of grace.¹⁰

If we follow this narrative, we have to talk about a radical transvaluation of values with respect to the impact of Christianity on the ancient world. Bad style and a despised low moral and social rank turned

⁸ Cf. a classic and a more recent study about the topic: Albrecht Dihle, 'Demut', in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum. Sachwörterbuch zur Auseinandersetzung des Christentums mit der antiken Welt*, ed. by Theodor Klauser, vol. III (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1957), pp. 735–778; Ekkehard Mühlenberg, *Altchristliche Lebensführung zwischen Bibel und Tugendlehre. Ethik bei den griechischen Philosophen und den frühen Christen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

⁹ Aristotle, *The Poetics*, transl. by W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 84–85 (1458a.22). For the catalogue of classical ancient virtues, cf. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. by H. Rackham (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), Book II– V.

¹⁰ Cf. A. Dihle, loc.cit. (note 8), pp. 755–773.

into a moral ideal that even exceeded the aristocratic virtues of bravery and wisdom. A schematizing exaggeration of this kind will, however, not survive historical criticism – for the reason alone that this development took place under the conditions of a great cultural synthesis in which the self-understanding of the Jewish-Christian tradition was shaped in the medium of Greek thinking and the society of late antiquity. If we take this into account, we can also find many historical continuities besides the discontinuity that I have just described. From a systemic perspective, however, I have decided to ignore those details. One reason for this is that there is another important aspect concerning this great historical development, and it is at least as astonishing as the boom of humility in the Christian West. Given the significance of humility for the identity of a Christian culture it is hard to imagine that Christian ethics could also do without the concept of humility. But this is exactly what happened. A look at the ethical theories of German Protestantism can illustrate this surprising fact. Wolfgang Trillhaas, Martin Honecker, Trutz Rendtorff, Eilert Herms, Dietz Lange or, more recently, Wilfried Härle – humility can usually not even be found in the index of their works, and there is no systematically relevant role for humility.¹¹ How can this be explained?

I think there are two main reasons. The first was already hinted at in the denominational characterization of this fact – catholic moral doctrine is much less obvious in this respect. First, one can see an after-effect of Luther's highly ambivalent relationship towards humility here, it seems. The notion of humility can originally be found in the context of his new concept of faith, which developed out of late medieval penitential theology. Humility represents the religious self-realization of the sinner. But as the epitome of the monastic form of life, it is increasingly affected by this criticism of legalism. In his *Magnificat* interpretation, Luther castigates the virtue – which exhibits itself in gestures and prepares for

¹¹ Wolfgang Trillhaas, *Ethik* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970); Martin Honecker, *Einführung in die Theologische Ethik. Grundlagen und Grundbegriffe* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1990); Trutz Rendtorff, *Ethik. Grundelemente, Methodologie und Konkretionen einer ethischen Theologie*, 2 volumes (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990/91); Eilert Herms, *Gesellschaft gestalten. Beiträge zur evangelischen Sozialethik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991); Dietz Lange, *Ethik in evangelischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002); Wilfried Härle, *Ethik* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011). Also in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, ed. by John Corrigan (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), humility plays no role. A recent exception is Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Michigan / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 78–93.

receiving grace – as a ‘wrong’, ‘made’ humility, even as a ‘secret pride’. Its contrast is the true humility of Mary, which is no ascetic self-humiliation, but an inner ‘inclination towards lesser things’, as Luther puts it. With his criticism of humility, Luther thus represents a radical aggravation of an ethical-religious dialectic of the Christian cardinal virtue. I will come back to this later. Due to his criticism of virtues, Luther returns to the literal use of language and does not translate that the Lord has seen the humility of his maiden, but: ‘he has seen the nothingness of his maiden.’¹²

Of course, Luther’s ambivalent relationship with humility was not the sole reason for the complete end of this tradition. It was probably decisive that humility increasingly became synonymous with a menial attitude and blind obedience towards authorities. Humility thus became incompatible with the self-understanding of modern human beings. A well-known proof for this transvaluation can be found in David Hume. In his *A Treatise on Human Nature*, he argues that, against the tradition of the ‘schools and pulpit’, one should consider humility not as a virtue, but as a vice.¹³ The result of this development is then confirmed by, e.g., Paul Tillich, who, in his *Systematic Theology*, almost casually states that there is an opposition between the humility and the dignity and freedom of human beings.¹⁴ Nobody has contributed more to humility’s loss of prestige and the thorough alienation towards the former prime Christian virtue than Friedrich Nietzsche. He turned an unease that had been accumulating for a long time into a provocative aggravation with a vigorous effect. For his biting criticism of Christianity, the ‘dangerous and defamatory ideal’ of humility is paradigmatic: Christianity has turned ‘timid baseness’ into virtuous humility by ‘lies’. For Nietzsche, it is almost the epitome of an ethics of resentment and ‘herd morality’ by which Christianity has suppressed the self-affirmation and self-enhancement of life for far too long.¹⁵

¹² D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 7 (Weimar 1897), p. 559: ‘er hat anghen die nichtickeyt seyner magt’.

¹³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Sect. VII.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 288.

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 27. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887. Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 12, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag / De Gruyter, 1988), pp. 108ff.

III. RATIONALIZING HUMILITY

For now, this sketch of the history of the concept has to suffice as a background for systematic considerations. I will address some detailed aspects of the problem later. This varied history of the rapid rise of humility in antiquity and its loss of prestige in modernity could suggest regarding it as a prime example of the often mourned 'loss of virtue'.¹⁶ For the 'malaise of modernity' is mostly due to a 'self'¹⁷ that is entirely thrown back to itself and hence – as one could extend the schema – to a self that lacks the object of any humility, because it lacks any religious-metaphysical frame of reference. In what follows, I would like to resist that temptation and suggest a different interpretation of the state of affairs. In this, I can at least partially follow Dietrich Rössler. In contrast to the so-called mainstream, he has at least reflected on the fate of humility, to be more precise: in the context of a discussion of the thesis about the 'loss of virtue'.¹⁸ Rössler convincingly shows that the claim of such a decline cannot be proven historically, and it also contradicts the innermost nature of morality. Morality is necessarily bound to the changing historical-cultural conditions. So it is almost ethically demanded that certain virtues vanish over the course of time, and new virtues develop. Of course, a third possibility is conceivable and can also be observed, i.e. that virtues survive various epochs, but their inner meanings change. Rössler does not think that humility is a virtue of this type, but regards it as bound to the conditions of life in the middle ages and not compatible with modernity. This is exactly the point where I would like to object and develop a different interpretation. For this purpose, I will address the question of the 'rationality of emotion' that has been discussed in the more recent debate, and present a slightly different view.

Given the historical background, it is recommendable for a further characterization of humility to start with the question of the relationship between virtue and emotion.¹⁹ According to the Aristotelian tradition, virtues are basic attitudes that are developed by education and habituation

¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, loc.cit. (note 6).

¹⁷ Cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Havard University Press, 1989), and *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press 1992).

¹⁸ Dietrich Rössler, *Akzeptierte Abhängigkeit. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Ethik*, ed. by F. Voigt (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 16–35.

¹⁹ Cf. Verena Mayer, 'Tugend und Gefühl', in Sabine Döring / Mayer (eds.), *Die Moralität der Gefühle* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), pp. 125–149.

and that dispose us in a certain way. Virtues can indeed have an emotional basis, or, as Aristotle says: refer to the *pathe*, the passions, even though this is not necessary. One example would be the dianoetic virtue of wisdom. If feelings are involved, however, virtue requires a certain distance towards the passions – not necessarily in the sense of the stoic ideal of emotionlessness (*apatheia*), but in the sense of an integration of basic emotions through reason. In accordance with the current philosophical interest, Aristotle does attribute a necessary function to emotions, seen as part of our capacity to aspire, for our motivation to act. At the same time, attitudes or dispositions are no simple emotions like fear, joy or anger, but also necessarily contain cognitive and conative aspects besides the emotive factors. If we understand humility, in a virtue ethical sense, as a basic attitude or disposition of this kind, it is not so much a simple emotion, but rather a certain attitude towards emotions.

Primarily in cultural sciences, but also philosophy, it has been pointed out that complex emotions, but even more so emotional dispositions, are not anthropological constants. They are rather determined by cultural factors. Verbalizations, symbols, narrative patterns and social forms of behaviour already determine the way we emotionally interpret certain experiences. This applies even more to the attitudes that are then acquired.²⁰ So if we want to identify the alleged rationality of such attitudes, we should first take the formative cultural patterns and interpretations into account. Humility is a particularly good piece of evidence for cultural relativity – and not only because of its varied history leading up to its vanishing in the present, but especially in its historical beginnings.

Wilhelm Hermann, the last protestant ethicist who was seriously interested in humility, has most notably defended the view that we can only understand the original sense of the humble attitude if we look at Jesus' humility.²¹ Jesus as the paragon of humility – humility as *imitatio Christi* – this is in fact a motif that is a common thread in the confusing multitude of Western theology of humility. With reference to early Christianity, the New Testament Scholar Ulrich Luz already talked about

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Cf. also Goldie's premise of the narrative structure of the emotions: Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 4ff.

²¹ Wilhelm Herrmann, 'Art. Demut', in *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 4 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1898), pp. 571–576; cf. Herrmann, *Ethik*, 5th edition, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), pp. 224–230.

an 'ethical Christology or Christological ethics' in his commentary to the classical section in Matt. 11:29.²² The person of Jesus – prefigured by motifs from Jewish tradition – is hence the cultural framework in which the sense of the humble attitude becomes intensified. The self-surrender to the divine will and thus – according to the double commandment of love – to the neighbour, culminating in the humiliating crucifixion, is understood as the expression of highest, divine dignity. In the personal unity of this contrast lies the original rationality of humility. Notably Augustine has contributed to its final conceptualization: 'Do you wish to lay hold of the loftiness of God? First catch hold of God's lowliness.'²³ The logic of humility results in the interpretation of the concrete figure of Jesus. At the same time, a feature can be seen in the inner dialectics of loftiness and lowliness that will not only be continued in the tradition of humility, but will count as a feature of religious feelings and attitudes in general.²⁴

When the eschatological expectations of Early Christianity are left behind and the challenge of a Christian conduct of life within the ancient world arises, humility becomes subject to a *second* wave of rationalisation. Roughly speaking, from the Early Christian roots an understanding of humility in terms of penitential theology develops first. Here humility entirely becomes a matter of religious self-assessment and is understood as contriteness in the face of one's own sinfulness and lack of rights against God and the neighbour. At the same time, the outer practice of self-humiliating asceticism arises, which attains a methodological

²² This refers to: '... learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart'. Cf. Ulrich Lutz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (EKK I/2) (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger Verlag/Neukirchener Verlag, 2007), p. 224.

²³ Augustinus, 'Sermo 117', in Sancti Aurelii Augustini, Hipponensis Episcopi, Opera Omnia, tom. 5 (PL 38 / Migne) (Paris 1861), pp. 661–671 (p. 671): 'Vis capere celsitudinem Dei? Cape prius humilitatem Dei.'

²⁴ Cf., e.g., Howard Wettstein, 'Awe and the Religious Life: A Naturalistic Perspective', in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXI (1997), 257–280 (pp. 260ff.). Wettstein explicitly uses the term *humility* and talks about a 'duality – humbled yet elevated [...] duality that seems very close to the bone of the religious orientation encouraged by so much of Jewish religious life (p. 261). Cf. also, e.g., Georg Simmel, *Gesammelte Schriften zur Religionssoziologie*, ed. by H. J. Helle (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1989), pp. 38, 40, 53, 55 et al. For Rudolf Otto's theory of religious feelings, for which this structure will also be systematically relevant, cf. Roderich Barth, 'Religion und Gefühl. Schleiermacher, Otto und die aktuelle Emotionsdebatte', in *Religion und Gefühl. Praktisch-theologische Perspektiven einer Theorie der Emotionen*, ed. by L. Charbonnier, M. Mader and B. Weyl (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 15–48.

character in monastic rules. In the debate about this penitential theology that can, for example, already be seen in Celsus, a transformation takes place that acknowledges humility in the doctrine of virtues of Greek thinking. For this development, which comprises a distinction between right and wrong forms of humility, the contrast with pride is decisive. Classical Greek literature could already explain the tragic complications of life by a hubris against the gods.²⁵ Greek ethics also knew virtues such as modesty, unpretentiousness or the Aristotelian concept of *mesotes*. But still the aristocratic ethics of the ancient world regarded megalopsychia – which can be translated as magnanimity or pride – as one of its finest virtues.²⁶ This conceptual field is the background for the further rationalisation and establishment of humility. Now it is simply equated with Socratic modesty or even stoic apathy and thus separated from the pure resignation into one's sinfulness. Subsequently, humility rises to a religiously re-interpreted megalopsychia or mangnanimitas, in the sense of striving for the truly good and becoming God-like. By contrast, pride turns into a feeling of self-worth that is merely based on social status and ethical achievements and hence the fundamental vice of the *superbia*. It even becomes the epitome of sin. From now on, pride and humility form a contrast. The latter, as the basic virtue, has to justify the moral-religious quality of any behaviour. Augustine merges the virtue ethical and penitential theological interpretation into a theology of grace and deepens it. His concise formulation of this transvaluation of the logic of passions is: 'There is [...] something in humility which [...] exalts the heart, and something in pride which debases it.'²⁷

This second, although many-voiced and heterogeneous, rationalisation of humility obviously means a significant change from the original notion of a humble attitude that was personified in Jesus. The understanding of humility as an attitude of realizing oneself and one's sins was presupposed in all of these conceptions. It is not compatible with the humility of Jesus, even if the monastic self-humiliation tries to return to the worldlessness of Early Christianity – in contrast to a virtue ethical arrangement with the world. The ideal of Christ's humility becomes a saving deed of God that is unachievable for human beings,

²⁵ Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté 2. Finitude et culpabilité* (livre II. La symbolique du mal) (Paris: Aubier 1988), p. 355–373.

²⁶ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (loc. Cit. Note 19), Book IV (1123a34–1125a35).

²⁷ Augustine, *City of God* (De civitate dei), Book 11–22, transl. by Philip Schaff.

but it facilitates the elevation of the humble person. At the same time, the quote from Augustine also shows that humility in its opposition to pride should not exclusively be understood as a feeling of suppression, but rather as an alternative, i.e. a religiously mediated form of self-respect. The recurring dialectic of loftiness and lowliness indicates an at least formal continuity to the interpretation of Jesus' humility.

A *third* rationalisation of the conception of humility takes place in modern ethics. This specifically modern interpretation of humility is related to the question: what could be the reason for human self-respect? And it is separated from the theology of mercy, although not necessarily from a religious context. Since the beginnings of this debate, the moral use of human freedom has been identified as the justification of pride and self-respect in a positive sense. The value and dignity of a human being are due to her ability to responsibly determine herself. This is a broad consensus within modern ethics. By now, Christian ethics beyond denominational borders has mostly agreed with this consensus. But the modern conceptions of human dignity are accompanied by the insight that this is primarily a *determination* of human beings, and the factual realization of freedom can merely approximate it. The use of freedom by finite individuals in their particular contexts is factually lagging behind its ideal and is hence deeply ambiguous. For this reason, quite different modern ethicists have been led from the opposition of pride and humility to the description of the concrete conscious shape of responsible freedom. At the same time, they distinguish – in the sense of the criticism of humility from Celsus to Luther – between a virtuous and a vicious or bootlicking humility. For instance, Descartes' *generosité*, Kant's respect for the moral law or Hartmann's moral pride explicitly include a virtuous or moral humility.²⁸ Humility, correctly understood, therefore does not at all contradict the modern awareness of freedom, but is rather reconstructed as its necessary prerequisite.

²⁸ René Descartes, *Les Passions de L'âme*, art. 149–159; Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*; Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethik* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962), p. 477: "True pride and true humility apparently belong together out of necessity, they demand each other, can only exist in synthesis." Even David Hume, loc. Cit. (note 13), who does not reformulate a positive concept of humility, maintains the dialectic of loftiness and lowliness in the mixed feeling of respect/contempt. However, humility exclusively means the aspect of suppression for him. He also maintains the distinction between a positive and a problematic form of pride. For Kant's feeling of respect/awe, cf. Birgit Recki, 'Kant on Religious Feeling', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3(2014), pp. 85–99.

Let me sum up the three stages of rationalisation again: in the interpretation of the person of Jesus, the notion of devotion to the divine will and fellow beings which makes us forget our care for our own lives, gains a dignified sense. In a varied further development, humility is turned into the self-assessment of the sinner and contrasted with pride as the true, i.e. religiously justified, form of self-respect. This understanding of humility is continued by the modern discourse about freedom and integrated as factual aspects into the awareness of human autonomy as moral humility. It is interesting from the perspective of the history of culture that a structural complementarity can be seen between ethical-religious ideas of biblical religion and the basic insights of modern ethics of reason, across several steps of transformations and interpretations. This exposition of the basic logic(s) of humility, however, leaves the question of a contemporary form of humility open.

IV. MANIFESTATIONS OF THE HUMBLE ATTITUDE

In the clarification of the relationship between virtue and feeling, I have called humility an inner attitude. As dispositions for certain ways of behaving, such basic attitudes are usually unconscious or, at most, only partially conscious. They only emerge from their latency in contexts and situations and actualize their innate tendencies in individual experiences and actions. As singular interpretations, such concretisations are of course structurally distinct from the underlying reservoir of senses and are necessarily a restriction of the possibilities contained within. Inner attitudes are, vice versa, the result of deposits of a multitude of cognitive, affective and conative implementations of the biographical history of one's education. If the reconstruction of the inner rationality of the humble attitude I have presented in the preceding section is correct, two features can be identified as necessary requirements. First, a relation to unconditionality is essential to this attitude. This can be seen in its reformulation in the context of modern models of moral self-determination. In terms of the example chosen above: Descartes talks about the similarity of freedom to God, Kant about the sublimity of the moral law and Hartmann about the perfection of the moral ideal and the inexorability of its demands. The dimension of unconditionality is thus relocated into human morality and does not necessarily require a religious explication. At the same time, this dimension of sense shows

a basic affinity and openness towards religious interpretations, as it can be seen ideally in Jesus' devotion to the divine will or in the religious-ethical orientation by Christ's perfect humility.

The second feature of the humble attitude is a unity in tension that results from this relation to unconditionality. It can be seen in the dialectics of loftiness and lowliness, the polarity of sin and mercy, the inner ambiguity of pride and suppression or the difference between determination and facticity. Formally, this feature could be summed up as the contrasting harmony of participation and withdrawal or immanence and transcendence. The humble attitude is, as it were, fixed in this dynamic opposition. If we now assume that an inner attitude that possesses these features can also be habitualized in the present – also since not only traditional religious, but modern interpretative schemata are available for this – this assumption can be made plausible by presenting potential manifestations of the humble attitude.

I previously noted that virtues usually refer to our emotional life or can even be regarded as specific attitudes or dispositions towards emotions. The ideal of a, to a great extent, independence from the passions represented by stoic calmness is an extreme and well-known case. Not least because it was regarded as a basic attitude, this ideal was – as we have seen – identified with the humble attitude in Christian antiquity. Robert C. Roberts has recently suggested an interpretation of this kind.²⁹ It seems to me, however, that this interpretation does not do justice to the inner tension of humility. If we are looking for the structural parallels with the inner unity in tension, a possible emotional expression of humility could rather be the positive, not at all humble feeling of gratitude. Just like the self-relativization in the face of something higher – in which it also participates – is typical for humility, gratitude contains knowledge about the incommensurability in relation to the gift it responds to.³⁰ With gratitude, I also refer to something that is, in a sense, unattainable for me and thus limiting me. But it is also bestowed upon me and elevates me.

²⁹ Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions* (see above, note 11), p. 88: 'Humility is not itself an emotion [...]. But humility is an emotion-disposition – primarily a negative one, a disposition *not* to feel the emotions associated with caring a lot about one's status. [...] it is the absence of a spiritually cannibalistic appetite. Humility is cannibal-anorexia, as we might say.'

³⁰ Cf. Georg Simmel, 'Soziologie', in *Simmel, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 11, ed. by O. Ramstedt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 661–670, especially pp. 667f.

The systematic distinction between the level of the inner attitude on the one hand and the episodic single feelings on the other hand also allows for understanding the humble attitude as an integral that comprises negative emotional aspects, but is not exhausted by them. Even the negative sense of the concept of humility, i.e. lowness, even humiliation, can be integrated this way without spoiling the positive overall sense. Such feelings of distress or being in over one's head can arise given a great responsibility whose dimension points to the possibility of not being able to cope. A positive experience such as success can also trigger a feeling of humility understood this way – a, as it were, curbed enthusiasm given the knowledge that this success was not only due to my own achievement, but that it also entails the failure of others. And of course such feelings arise in the context of the awareness of one's guilt, i.e. if the structural dimension of this guilt is taken into account and exceeds the capacity of our personal responsibility. In religious self-assessment, the principal dimension of such feelings is reflected and they can turn, *sub specie aeternitatis*, into feelings of one's own worthlessness or voidness. If the humble attitude was restricted to such negative aspects, it could indeed be accused of leading to resignation. However, as, e.g., Max Scheler has pointed out in his phenomenology of humility, such experiences are in fact compatible with natural pride. Hence they are distinct from menial servitude.³¹ And also from a religious point of view, the native aspects are countered by a positive *telos*, i.e. being accepted by the heavenly father. Roberts characterizes humility, understood in a Christian sense, as a 'transcendent form of self-confidence'. Transcendence is meant here as the overcoming of mundane value standards.³²

However, the humble attitude can never wholly manifest itself in episodic single feelings. As the epitome of a totality of the ideas and emotions synthesized in it, this pre-conscious attitude can, if at all, only be represented in emotional consciousness as moods. These forms of emotional life are considered to be a marginal case by most cognitivistically oriented research on the emotions, and are explored by Heidegger and others after him in the 20th century. They are characterized by their intentional indeterminacy and can comprise single experiences that are individualized by their intentions or accompany them with their

³¹ Max Scheler, 'Zur Rehabilitierung der Tugend (1913)', in *Scheler, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3 (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1995), pp. 13–31 (pp. 17ff.).

³² Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions* (see above note 11), p. 81.

specific undertone.³³ The German word for humility, *Demut*, suggests that humility is not only a pre-conscious attitude or an episodic single feeling, but can also manifest itself as a mood. If we try to describe the mood of humility phenomenally, one can distinguish it from exalted pride by describing it as a lowered mood with a trace of sincerity that might stem from having overcome a sadness. But at the same time, it should not be confused with a rueful-frightened timidity.

The fact that a positive description is difficult could have a reason that makes me come back to Luther's critique of humility.³⁴ One of his basic claims is that true humility does not know that it is humble or – as he says metaphorically – that it cannot see itself. For if it were directed at an awareness of itself – and this is Luther's clever argument – a performative self-contradiction would arise: In the moment of its self-assertion, humility would no longer be selfless devotion. If we continue this thought, the adequate manifestation of a humble attitude that is oriented at the perfect humility of Christ or simply moral autonomy would not so much be the emotional tensions accompanying it or a contemplative mood, but rather an engagement with, or losing oneself in, concrete responsibility. Only in this sense would humility also be an ethical and not just a religious attitude. It still necessarily implies a relation to oneself, but such that its expressions are not a self-feeling. It would be, in Harnack's profound formulation, an inner attitude that 'has found its centre outside of itself'.³⁵

We must not forget one final expression of humility. Feelings and attitudes are usually bound to a correlative bodily behaviour – this is a consensus in almost all theories of emotions. Regardless of how this correlation is described, facial expressions and gestures reveal a counterpart to inner life. Humility also has its correlating gestures, although they are not safe from false attitudes and strategic abuse. One example of an appropriate gesture of humility, perhaps especially due to its unconventionality, would be chancellor Willy Brand's Warsaw Genuflection. At the time, it was highly controversial in Germany, but it has become entrenched in our collective memory. Recently, Navid

³³ Cf. the classic essay by Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Das Wesen der Stimmungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995). For the newer debate, see, e.g., Peter Goldie, *The Emotions* (see above note 19), pp. 141–160.

³⁴ See above, note 12.

³⁵ Adolf von Harnack, "Sanftmut, Huld und Demut" in der alten Kirche, in *Festgabe für Julius Kaftan zu seinem 70. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), pp. 113–129 (p. 123).

Kermani in his speech at the celebration of the German Basic Law's 65th anniversary mentioned the strange paradox that a state regained its dignity by an act of humility.³⁶ The fact that this comment was made by a critic of the theology of the Cross has a particular secular payoff given the origin of the humility tradition.

V. CONCLUSION

The recent debate about the morality of emotions has managed to free emotions and consequently attitudes towards emotions like humility from the ghetto of irrational and therefore ethically questionable states. This correction allows for an adequate description of the personal identity of moral agents. Taking the connection between religion and emotion into account directs our attention towards complex emotions and attitudes, their layered and hermeneutic character and their shapeability by cultural symbols and institutions. The rationality of the emotional is also more appreciated in this broader sense than would be possible in the distinction between reasons and causes.

There is not necessarily a contradiction between humility and the modern human self-understanding – which might be regarded as the reason why humility has disappeared from modern ethical theories and debates. Following reformatory traditions, but also modern discourse about freedom, it can rather be shown that humility in the sense of an inner attitude can be regarded as the virtue-ethical basis of a culture of responsibility. For it is the ideal of an inner attitude that not only affectively internalizes the transgression of particular interests, but also the ambiguities connected with it. This conception of humility is not intended as a religious solution to the so-called problem of motivation, but as a non-resignating way of dealing with its facticity. From a culture-hermeneutical view, the ethical practice of free, democratic societies can – against all cultural pessimism – be seen as an expression of true humility. It is a humility that, following Luther's conception, does not become a talking point, but is manifested in the concrete living out of individual and institutional responsibility. As a distance towards one's own positionality, it also embodies the ability to make political compromises and also to accept them.

³⁶ Available at: <<https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2014/-/280688>> [accessed 19/07/2014].