

Wisdom and Humility

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Many wisdom scholars list humility as one of the important values associated with wisdom. It is the opposite of arrogance and vanity and is linked to many other wisdom values. As Tom Lombardo [writes](#), “A good dose of humility is an essential quality of wisdom.” To best illustrate this linkage, let us examine the [lists](#) of wisdom values and comments upon them compiled by Wisdom Page founder Copthorne Macdonald.

One value that he stresses is “clarity about what is.” He advocates “a reality-seeking, truth-seeking orientation,” one that reflects “openness” and that recognizes “that there are limits to personal knowledge and to the ability of our species to know.” He also emphasizes attentiveness, which is related to reality-seeking and like it requires humility.

Two philosophers who provide insight into these relationships are the Frenchwoman Simone Weil and the English novelist, as well as philosopher, Iris Murdoch. Weil emphasized proper “attention,” which meant trying to empty our soul “of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he [she, or it] is, in all his [her, or its] truth.” As a commentator on these words [noted](#), Weil believed that various types of study can increase our ability to pay such attention. But first there must be a “sincere effort to understand; and second, humility.”

Murdoch in her [The Sovereignty of Good](#) cites Weil’s emphasis on “attention” and acknowledges her debt to her. Murdoch also writes that “humility is . . . selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues.” (95) She also indicates that looking at reality clearly necessitates “moral imagination and moral effort” (37) and not letting our egos interfere and fog up the way we perceive other people or things. “The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. . . . One of its main pastimes is daydreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain.” (78-79) “We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals our world.” (84) The poet W. H. Auden [captured](#) this mental state brilliantly in the lines,

And when Truth had met him and put out her hand,
He clung in panic to his tall belief
And shrank away like an ill-treated child.

Murdoch goes on to write of the necessity of “unselfing,” of freeing ourselves from being ego driven. Like Weil, she believes that studying various subjects can link truth-seeking and humility. “The honesty and humility required of the student . . . is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory.” (89) Leland Beaumont, who has often reflected on wisdom values, [writes](#) something

similar: “Humility is openness to learning. It is deciding that facts are more real and more important than ego.” The [scientific method](#) also implies such an approach because it involves “systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses.”

Although Murdoch includes such disciplines as the sciences, mathematics, and languages among the studies that can increase our respect for truth and reality, she has a special fondness for the arts, including literature. Like paying respectful attention to nature, the arts can increase our appreciation of beauty. They can present us “with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated. . . . Art [including literature] transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer. It is a kind of goodness by proxy. Most of all it exhibits to us the connection, in human beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion. The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice.” (87)

The political philosopher and historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin believed that wise political thinkers also approached the political realm with a similar mindset to that of great writers. In an essay on “Political Judgment,” in his book [A Sense of Reality](#), he stated that political wisdom was “a gift akin to that of some novelists, that which makes such writers as, for example, Tolstoy or Proust convey a sense of direct acquaintance with the texture of life; not just the sense of a chaotic flow of experience, but a highly developed discrimination of what matters from the rest, whether from the point of view of the writer or that of the characters he describes. Above all this is an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what; how things seem to vary to different observers, what the effect of such experience upon them may be; what the result is likely to be in a concrete situation of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces.” To Berlin it was the “concrete situation” that mattered, and his enemy was any dogmatism or Utopianism that failed to acknowledge the plurality and variety of human existence. “Obviously what matters is to understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness, the particular men and events and dangers, the particular hopes and fears which are actively at work in a particular place at a particular time.” (44-46)

Humble people are not dogmatic and therefore can see reality better than those who view it through skewed dogmatic lenses. I have written on this in detail in an [essay on wisdom and politics](#) and in [one on global warming denial](#). In the first essay, there is this 2005 quote from Democratic Congressman David Price (N.C.): “Humility is out of fashion these days. Political leaders, advocates, and pundits often display an in-your-face assertiveness, seeming to equate uncertainty or even reflectiveness with weakness and a lack of moral fiber.” Price quoted theologian Reinhold Niebuhr about the spiritual pride demonstrated by claiming “divine sanction” for one’s actions.

Niebuhr is often associated with political realism, as are others like George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau. In their book [Ethical Realism](#) Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, however, also stress that these three men placed great stress on nations acting with “a sense of humility.” And

just as an individual's humility is linked to a better perception of reality, so too is a nation's. In a 2008 book, [Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power](#), scholar Dale R. Herspring, a conservative Republican, criticizes President Bush's secretary of defense for his arrogance, which contributed to our government's viewing Iraq inaccurately.

In addition to Niebuhr, many other theologians have emphasized humility and sometimes stressed that it enables us to view reality more truly. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton is one example, having [referred to](#) "humility as the source of unfailing light" and [written](#) that "the way to reality is the way of humility."

Humility is also linked to [love, "the greatest wisdom virtue,"](#) and related values such as compassion, empathy, generosity, commitment, patience, and respect. St. Paul's [words about love](#) suggest these relationships "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

What one wisdom scholar, Alan Nordstrom, [has written](#) about Shakespeare also suggests some connections: "Wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head. Though it is prudent to be canny and not gullible, and it is astute to be alert to the dangerous ways of the world (the flesh, and the devil), what is still more essential is a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness."

Another wisdom scholar, psychologist Robert Sternberg, [has written](#): "People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God." He believes that "smart and well-educated people" are often unwise because of four fallacies, which he labels the egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability fallacies. All four reflect too big an ego, overestimating one's own importance and powers. Thus, the opposites of humility—pride, arrogance, vanity, egotism—block the way to wisdom by keeping out love and the concern for the common good that Sternberg emphasizes.

Closely connected to humility is tolerance, still another wisdom value. Know-it-alls tend to be intolerant. If, however, we are willing to admit our own limitations, we are more likely to recognize that others may have insights, perceptive abilities, or knowledge we lack. This recognition and genuine truth-seeking should make us more tolerant, and even welcoming, of other people's views because what should be most important to us is not protecting our own fragile egos, but using all the means available, including the ideas of others, to arrive at truth. Humble people are also more tolerant of other people's failings because they recognize and admit their own.

Because humility has often been lacking in the political realm, so too has tolerance. And this lack of tolerance has hindered effective compromises and working for the common good, which should be the primary aim of politicians such as our members of Congress.

In [writing on the “root of war,”](#) Thomas Merton alluded to a lack of humility and thus tolerance when he observed:

And “being wrong” is something we have not yet learned to face with equanimity and understanding. We either condemn it with god-like disdain or forgive it with god-like condescension. We do not manage to accept it with human compassion, humility and identification. Thus we never see the one truth that would help us begin to solve our ethical and political problems: that we are *all* more or less wrong, that we are *all* at fault, *all* limited and obstructed by our mixed motives, our self-deception, our greed, our self-righteousness and our tendency to aggressivity and hypocrisy.

In our refusal to accept the partially good intentions of others and work with them . . . we are unconsciously proclaiming our own malice, our own intolerance, our own lack of realism, our own ethical and political quackery.

Perhaps in the end the first real step toward peace would be a realistic acceptance of the fact that our political ideals are perhaps to a great extent illusions and fictions to which we cling out of motives that are not always perfectly honest: that because of this we prevent ourselves from seeing any good or any practicability in the political ideals of our enemies.

Some wisdom scholars have included humor as still another wisdom value, and Reinhold Niebuhr linked it with humility when he [wrote](#):

Humor is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humor is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to “stand off” from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. We are rather insignificant little bundles of energy and vitality in a vast organization of life. But we pretend that we are the very center of this organization. This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with our lack of awareness of it. The less we are able to laugh at ourselves the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us. . . .

To meet the disappointments and frustrations of life, the irrationalities and contingencies with laughter, is a high form of wisdom. Such laughter does not obscure or defy the dark irrationality. It merely yields to it without too much emotion and friction. A humorous acceptance of fate is really the expression of a high form of self-detachment. If men do not take themselves too seriously, if they have some sense of the precarious nature of the human enterprise, they prove that they are looking at the whole drama of life not merely from the circumscribed point of their own interests but from some further and higher vantage point.

Perhaps no great writer displays more of a combination of humility, truth-telling, humor, and wisdom in his life and writings than Anton Chekhov, who in his stories and plays depicted both the tragic and comic aspects of life (see [here](#) for more on his rare combination of wisdom values).

Three other wisdom values mentioned by Macdonald are courage, creativity, and possessing a sense of awe and wonder toward this universe we live in; and humility enhances all three qualities. If we are humble, we are less likely to be fearful of acting in ways that some might not

approve of or which might damage our fragile egos. We will have less need to feel superior. This will free us up to have the courage of acting according to other wisdom values like truth-seeking and love. In a similar way, humility can stimulate creativity, freeing us from fears of failing by exploring new, untried paths; and, by reducing our ego concerns, it can heighten our appreciation of the glories of our world.

Macdonald greatly appreciated the wisdom of psychologist Abraham Maslow and [wrote](#) that “Maslow's writings tell us much about the nature of wisdom. Maslow's self-actualizers focused on concerns outside of themselves. . . . They were creative, too, and appreciated the world around them with a sense of awe and wonder.” In his [The Farther Reaches of Human Nature](#), Maslow has a chapter on creativity. In it he writes, “The creative attitude requires both courage and strength . . . popularity becomes a minor consideration. Fear and weakness cast out creativeness or at least make it less likely.” To be creative, Maslow adds, we need “less fear of ridicule, of humiliation and of failure”; we need to become more “Taoistic in the sense of humility, non-interference, receptivity.” (64-65)

Linking humility with a sense of awe, Maslow writes: “In any case, I have found in the most creative scientists I have talked with that the more they know, the *more* apt they are to go into an ecstasy in which humility, a sense of ignorance, a feeling of smallness, awe before the tremendousness of the universe, or the stunningness of a hummingbird, or the mystery of a baby are all a part. . . . Hence the humility and self-confessed ‘ignorance’ and yet also the happiness of the great transcender-scientist.” (280-81)

In conclusion, although love may be the greatest of the wisdom virtues, a sense of humility underlies and heightens, not only love, but also many of the others. Despite the fact that humility often seems in short supply in our Internet world of countless opinions and opinionators, most of the great religions of the world stress its importance—though some believers seem more dogmatic than humble. And non-believers like cosmologist (and agnostic) Carl Sagan can also emphasize the importance of humility, as he does when he [states](#) that the vastness and complexity of our universe are a “profound sermon on humility.”