I. INTRODUCTION
Humility has not always been regarded as a virtue. Aristotle, if he recognized it at all, seems to have regarded it as a vice, a deficiency in regard to magnanimity. In the popular culture of the twenty-first century, while courage is held in high moral esteem, the regard given to humility is more questionable. Humility, however, is not universally dismissed as a virtue. Many see it as having moral value. In fact a number of contemporary philosophers are relatively clear that humility is a morally valuable trait and so is a moral virtue, although they disagree about its character. For traditional Christianity and Judaism, of course, and for other religious traditions, humility is a religious virtue. However, if humility is a religious virtue is it different from humility as a moral virtue? In what follows we shall start with the question: What is the best way to understand the general notion of humility? (Sec. II). Next the question: What are the core contrasting states that humility opposes? (Sec. III). And third: Does humility as a religious virtue have a distinctive and abiding character? (Sec. IV)

II. UNDERSTANDING THE GENERAL NOTION
OF HUMILITY

The “general notion of humility” is what people in general understand by humility and its cognate humble, as expressed in their ordinary discourse. Whether or not they regard humility as a virtue, people proficient in English use humility and humble in ordinary discourse with comparative ease. And in that discourse a range of common-use features of humility may be noted. Each of these feature embodies an expression of humility or a way of being humble. Here are several:

1. Having a low opinion of oneself, especially when others have a higher opinion of one, as expressed in one’s saying, “Yes, I have come through some hard times, but I was lucky. It was not due to any thing I did.”
2. Having a low estimate of one’s merit, as expressed in one’s saying, “Thank you for the kind words, but I am not really such a good mathematician [or such a good carpenter, etc, or such a good person].”
3. Having a modest opinion of one’s importance or rank, so that when reasonable judgments can vary one’s judgment is on the low side, as expressed in one’s saying, “My contribution was not that much. Not nearly as much as S’s.”
(4) Absence of self-assertion, as expressed in one’s demurring or remaining silent when one has made a contribution or has an ability or has merit, even though one does not fear being contradicted.

(5) Claiming little as one’s desert, as when one says, “No, I don’t deserve that award. Please give it to S,” especially when in the eyes of others one deserves it.

(6) Having or showing a consciousness of one’s defects, as when one says or reflects, “I get angry far too easily.”

(7) Not being proud, haughty, or arrogant, expressed of one by others when they say, “She is a humble person,” meaning she is not one or more of these.

All of these expressions of humility are included in various dictionary definitions of “humility” or “humble.” In addition we can observe that in popular parlance not being vain or vainglorious is another way of being humble, as is being modest. Dressing modestly may not in itself be an expression of humility, but one who is modest about her accomplishments is being humble in one of the ways of being humble. Dictionaries sometimes partially define “humility” and “humble” in terms of modesty and being modest.

Not all expressions of humility are equally profound. Some engage us more deeply than others. One may have a low estimate of one’s merit or importance only periodically or only once. This would then be a single humble act, possibly out of character. Not being arrogant or proud, by contrast, is closer to a way of being. Also one of the identified features of humility, claiming little as one’s desert, may be expressed in what one says or in what one truly feels. Each is recognized as an expression of humility, although the second is more profound. Making an apology is similar. The child who under parental duress says to his sister, “I’m sorry,” has fulfilled the parental instruction to apologize even if his apology is not from the heart.

Some of these expressions of humility require relationships to others or a social setting, such as (3) having a modest opinion of one’s importance or rank and (5) claiming little as one’s desert. But not being arrogant does not require a social setting. A hermit can be proud or not proud. While the noted expressions of humility can vary in their profundity and in their requirements, each is identifiable as a feature of humility in the general notion of humility, and each is a way of being humble.

Even though each is identifiable as a distinct way of being humble, there is some overlap among many of these features of humility. Specifically, (1) having a low opinion of oneself, (2) having a low estimate of one’s merit, (3) having a modest opinion of one’s importance or rank, and (4) absence of self-assertion overlap, so that often what indicates that one feature applies indicates that the others do as well; and (2) and (5) claiming little as one’s desert, similarly overlap. Moreover, some of these features may be incompatible in their requirements. (5) does not require self-knowledge, but (6) being conscious of one’s defects, does. And (6) seems to contradict (1) having a low opinion of oneself, since such a low opinion could be false. Yet all are features of humility in some expressions of humility despite such contradictions. In the same way, regarding games to use Wittgenstein’s well-known example, while some games require physical dexterity and some do not and while some are played on a board and some are played on a field, each is a game.

Philosophical accounts of humility
Different contemporary philosophical accounts of humility—efforts to define or to say what humility is—typically focus on some one characteristic of humility and offer it as a defining feature. J. L. A. Garcia in his discussion of humility considers and presents a number of such accounts. What is of interest is how each is in touch with—echoes—common-use features of the general notion of humility. Among the accounts Garcia considers are:

(1) Julia Driver’s account: Humility is someone’s underestimating her good features. Driver’s account echoes or is close to (1) having a low opinion of oneself and to (2) having a low estimate of one’s merit. Driver is offering an account of modesty, but she allows that “humility is closely akin to modesty.” Dictionaries, as we noted, sometimes partially define “humility” in terms of modesty.

(2) Owen Flanagan’s account: Humility is someone’s not overestimating her good features. This account echoes or is close to (3) having a modest opinion of one’s importance or rank, to (4) absence of self-assertion, and to (5) claiming little as one’s desert.’

(3) Norvin Richards’ account: Humility is someone’s having a proper perspective on herself, knowing herself and her good qualities, in the face of the temptation to exaggerate. Richards’ account echoes or is close to (4) absence of self-assertion, and to (6) having or showing a consciousness of one’s defects.

(4) Robert Roberts and Jay Wood’s account: Humility is unconcern with others’ opinion. This is their characterization of “humility as opposed to vanity”; their characterization of “humility as opposed to arrogance” is different. The person who is humble, as opposed to arrogant, has no disposition “to infer some entitlement claim from a supposition of one’s superiority, and to think, act, and feel on the basis of that claim.” The person who is humble in this way avoids a “preoccupation with [his or her] own entitilements.” Both of Roberts and Wood’s accounts echo or are close to (1) having a low opinion of oneself, to (3) having a modest opinion of one’s importance or rank, and to (5) claiming little as one’s desert. Their characterization of “humility as opposed to arrogance” is particularly close to (5).

In their account Roberts and Wood are aware that there are different expressions of humility, for they distinguish between humility in its opposition to vanity and humility in its opposition to arrogance. Later we shall briefly return to Roberts and Wood’s comments on humility. They are also aware that humility, or humility in its profound expression, requires a turning from self-concern or a preoccupation with oneself. This, as will be argued, is a feature of an expression of humility when it is opposed to humility’s core contrasting states.

Each of these philosophical accounts of humility Garcia finds inadequate, but each he also finds “captures a truth” about humility. In saying this he indicates the strengths of these accounts. Each echoes one or more features of humility, whatever problems they may have as a full account of humility. Garcia himself offers his own account of humility—an “if and only if, and to the extent that” definition of humility—that, briefly put, makes humility “being unimpressed with ourselves.” Garcia expresses his conviction that there must be something in which “humility consists,” and for him the something in which humility consists will be necessary and sufficient for humility. However, although he does not say so, in allowing that the conceptions of humility he rejects capture features that may characterize the humble person, he in effect supports the polythetic nature of the concept.
Why humility is a polythetic concept

A polythetic concept applies to a class that is not defined by necessary and sufficient properties, but instead its members are marked by characteristics shared by many but not all instances, rather as, in Wittgenstein’s language, family resemblances may be shared. Polythetic concepts have been contrasted with monothetic concepts. For monothetic concepts all the instances of the class to which it applies are included in the class by virtue of necessary and sufficient conditions. Is humility a polythetic or a monothetic concept? Do the instances of humility share only family resemblances (so that the concept is polythetic), or are all the instances of humility included in the class by virtue of necessary and sufficient conditions (so that the concept is monothetic)? On the evidence of common usage, backed up by dictionary definitions, and allowing that the different contemporary philosophical accounts capture or echo one or more sometimes-present features of humility, we may say that humility is polythetic (so that instances of humility are not defined or captured by necessary and sufficient properties, but instead are marked by characteristics shared by many but not all instances). The common-use features of humility in its general notion and the different contemporary philosophical accounts, which echo them, show us different ways of being humble or of expressing humility.

Humility, then, is best understood as a polythetic concept. Is “humility” a “trouser-word” getting its meaning in different uses from a range of different contrasts, each being a different way of not having humility? To some extent it may be. One can be humble in not being concerned with the opinion of others or in not being self-assertive or in not being arrogant. But it is not a trouser-word to the extent that “real” is, “real” being Austin’s famous example of a trouser-word. For humility can be expressed positively by, for instance, having an awareness of one’s defects or shortcomings or claiming little as one’s desert or being lowly or having lowness of mind. Yet humility does have several contrasting negatives that provide it, as it were, with different meanings in different contexts. While this does not make “humility” a polysemic word, like “branch,” it does make it somewhat like “real,” of which Austin says, it “has the baffling feature of having neither one single >meaning”, nor yet ambiguity, a number of different meanings.” As a polythetic concept “humility” has one meaning, but that meaning allows different expressions of humility in different contexts. Allowing that there are different expressions of humility of course is not to allow that they are all equally profound.

Summing up so far, humility as a general notion is a polythetic concept. And this means that there are different ways of being humble.

III. CORE CONTRASTS BETWEEN HUMILITY AND PRIDE AND BETWEEN HUMILITY AND THE PRIDE-SHAME AXIS

Although the concept of humility is polythetic, at the same time there is an abiding core contrast to humility to be noted. At its core, especially but not only in a strong strain of traditional religious understanding, humility has a deep opposition to pride. In fact, there are two oppositions here. One is between humility and pride itself and the other is the opposition between humility and the axis of pride-shame. Both will be explored in this section.

Let us begin with the opposition between humility and pride. One of the features of humility in its general notion is not being proud, haughty, or arrogant, so that one of the
opposites of humility is pride. Furthermore, pride has inveterately been regarded as the opposite of humility, traditionally and in modern moral and religious sensibilities. Dictionaries typically partially define “humility” in terms of the absence of pride or of being proud, and all the philosophical accounts presented are compatible with humility opposing pride. Moreover, it is a primary or core opposite that abides from context to context, at least in religious contexts.

Aquinas says that pride is “directly contrary” to the virtue of humility. If humility is a virtue, then pride is the vice to which it is opposed. Aquinas also says that “the sinfulness of pride of its very nature is most grievous. For it outmatches other sins in the turning away from God. . . .” We may think that, if the sinfulness of pride is most grievous, then the virtue of humility is the most beneficial or necessary. Aquinas maintains that humility is not the “sovereign virtue,” since as a “moral virtue” it is below the “theological virtues,” which are faith, hope, and charity. Yet he also maintains that humility can be understood as being “first by way of removing obstacles, and so . . . holds the initial place in that it expels pride” and “in this sense . . . humility is said to be the foundation of the spiritual edifice.” For Aquinas, while humility is technically a “moral virtue,” it is foundational to a religious or spiritual life, and in this sense is the “first” religious virtue. It was recognized by Aquinas in the thirteenth century as a significant virtue, and it was by Iris Murdoch in the twentieth century, for whom humility is “one of the most difficult and central of the virtues.” Murdoch, though, does not see humility as a religious virtue or a virtue that relates to God, and she is silent on how grievous pride is.

The core contrast between pride and humility that is of concern to us exists for humility as a religious virtue, that is, humility that relates to God (or in nontheistic traditions to a nonreligious transcendent), but it also exists in one significant expression of humility for nonreligious humility and for humility as a moral virtue. However the kind of pride that contrasts with humility is a self-reflective pride that should be distinguished from certain secondary types of pride or candidates for pride. It should be distinguished from having a proud bearing or aloof demeanor. These may mark shyness instead of pride or the kind of pride that relates to our concern. Similarly the kind of pride pertinent to our concern is distinguishable from, for instance, certain cases of being proud of one’s son or daughter or others to whom one is related, such as being proud of one’s son who has done well in school. In this latter instance “proud of” is used in an innocuous sense that comes to being properly pleased with one’s son. In these cases “I am very pleased with how well you have done in school” serves the same function as “I am proud of how well you have done in school,” and the first could be used instead of the second. In the New Testament a variant of the first locution is used when God as “a voice from heaven” says of Jesus after his baptism, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3.17). Some would call what is expressed in these instances “proper pride.” But it is not self-reflective pride. If being pleased with another for his or her own sake is pride at all, it is an other-directed pride, directed toward another with whom one is pleased, as opposed to being self-reflectively proud for one’s own sake. We cannot say, however, that all cases of being proud of one’s son or daughter or family relative or friend, etc. B are of this nature, for in other instances one may be proud of the other self-reflectively. (Could “pride” be polythetic? Obviously it could be. If it is, then there would be different expressions and forms of pride. Our concern with self-reflective pride, as the kind that has a core contrast with humility, allows that
there can be other expressions and even kinds of pride.)

How, then, can we characterize or usefully describe that self-reflective pride that is opposed to humility? As Hume saw, pride relates to oneself; pride can have various foci or “subjects,” as Hume called them, as long as they are “related to us.” Allowing that Hume is commenting on self-reflective pride, he seems right about this. The “subjects” of one’s pride might include one’s accomplishments, one’s abilities, one’s parents’ social position, one’s son’s doing well in school, and one’s moral uprightness; they might include one’s tennis game, one’s speaking ability, the size of one’s house, and one’s lineage. But one is not proud of the brightness of the moon or of the shape of Mt. Whitney, although one may be proud of one’s painting of the moon or of one’s ascent of Mt. Whitney. Some of the things one might be proud of are one’s accomplishments (climbing Mt. Whitney), some partially one’s accomplishment (one’s tennis game), and some not one’s accomplishment at all (one’s lineage).

As there is an innocuous kind of pride, so too, we should note, there is an innocuous sort of shame and being ashamed, a sort that does not impinge on humility. This sort of shame comes to being properly disappointed with someone. When one is properly disappointed in someone close to one may feel ashamed, but this may be other-directed shame, so that “I am ashamed of what he did” and “I am disappointed in him” say essentially the same thing. (“Shame” too, we should allow, may be polythetic. In addition there are meanings that do not require feeling or being ashamed: “shame” may mean public scorn, as in “he endured the shame of being demoted.”) The kind of shame to be noted here is a self-reflective shame that correlates with self-reflective pride.

If one of the “subjects” of one’s pride is one’s tennis game, then when one has a good game one will tend to feel proud, and conversely if one’s game does not measure up to the standard one has set oneself, then one will tend to feel ashamed. For the various “subjects” of one’s pride, attainment is the occasion for pride and failure is the occasion for shame. Thus, just as pride can have any of various “subjects,” so can shame. As Richard of St Victor was aware in the twelfth century, his religious contemporaries could be ashamed of poverty and of being lowly (despite Mt. 11.29), and they could be “more ashamed to have filthy clothing than a filthy mind.” For Richard such shame is not “ordered” or “true” in that his contemporaries were ashamed of the wrong things; nevertheless, he saw, it is still shame. In The Brothers Karamazov Dostoyevsky’s brief portrait of Father Ferapont, an acetic monk who lives on bread and water the year round, shows how vanity and pride can attach to an ability to fast. Pride and shame are understandable as reactions to coming up to, or failing to come up to, a standard or ideal regarding any of various “subjects” that form a person’s ideal self-conception. If one sees oneself as an exceptionally good tennis player, or as a good tennis player manqué, then one’s tennis game becomes a “subject” of one’s pride. Similarly for having parents of a certain social standing, having a large house, and being able to fast all year. Some in this connection speak of a “model identify” or an “ego ideal.” As it will be understood here, such a model identity or ego ideal is one’s ideal self-conception, or a set of ideal self-conceptions, and is such that when one meets it or one of them mutatis mutandis one is proud in a self-reflective way and when one fails to meet it or one of them mutatis mutandis one is
ashamed in a self-reflective way. One can, we should recognize, strive to approach an ideal without that ideal being an ego ideal in this sense. Those who hold Gautama Buddha as an ideal and seek to be like the Buddha in the way they live may not have this as an ego ideal, and those who seek to imitate the life of Christ may not have this ideal as an ego ideal. The ideal of being like the Buddha or of imitating Christ would not be an ego ideal for an aspirant if the aspirant were not proud when she or he meets (or draws closer) to the ideal and not ashamed when she or he fails to do so. In a similar way many other ideals individuals strive to approach may not operate as ego ideals. However when any of these ideals, or any of a nearly infinite range of ideal self-conceptions, is such that meeting it makes one proud and failing to meet it makes one ashamed, then it operates as an ego ideal, or as we may term it a “pride ideal.”

Although one can be proud of anything that relates to oneself, ranging from one’s genealogy to one’s nicely trimmed lawn, what one person may be intensely proud of may be nothing to be proud of for another. One person may be very proud of her swimming ability, while a second person may not see his swimming ability as an object of pride. He does not regard it as something worthy of his pride. He B and perhaps he cannot swim at all B does not regard it as important for “who he is.” The first person, if she fails to excel in her swimming by losing a contest, say, will or may well feel ashamed. The second person would not be ashamed of coming in last in a swimming contest. However, being very proud of his ability to speak French, he would be ashamed to learn that he had for years mispronounced a French word. What accounts for this phenomenon is that the two persons have different pride ideals.

Often pride and shame are public pride and shame. Pride ideals, when they are shared by societies or cultures, constitute a community standard; conversely the content of the pride ideals of individuals in a society may in great part be determined by the community’s standards. The existence of honor societies and honor groups make it clear that there can be public pride and shame; in such societies members feel proud when they meet the expectations or standards of the society (or of the honor group within the society), and feel ashamed when they do not. Again, public shame may be involved when a family member is shamed by the family into doing something or a member of a community is shamed into doing something. If the family member or the member of the community is made to feel ashamed for his or her failure, the shame is public shame arising from not meeting the family or community standard, which has become internalized as the pride ideal of the individual.

But there is as well private shame. When we speak of secret shame we may or may not mean a shame that is essentially private. Arthur Dimmsdale’s shame in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter is a secret shame. Hester Prynne, the mother of his child, wears her scarlet letter for all to see. The father, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, does not confess his paternity. He too wears a scarlet letter, but under his clothing out of sight. Acutely aware of what he has done, he is ashamed, but in secret. When Dimmesdale brings his act into the open, his shame, like his guilt, becomes public. His shame becomes public because his pride ideal is in accord with the standards of his community. This, however, need not be the case. One can also have a private shame in the sense of being ashamed of not coming up to an idiosyncratic ideal that one’s community does not recognize, and in this case one’s private shame cannot become public shame and is essentially private. One might be ashamed in this way, for instance, of being in
accord with the gender ideal of one’s society. A member of the Schutzstaffel, or S.S., in Nazi-occupied Europe might have come to have feelings of sympathy for the Jewish families he was ordered to persecute and then might have come to have an essentially private shame when he carried out his orders. One might be ashamed (or proud) in this way of being less generous, or more generous, than one’s society or family thinks proper. Almost anything can be part of a person’s pride ideal and give rise to shame, public or private, as long as it is “related to us.”

Some paradoxes about humility

Can one be proud of one’s virtue? The question is unsettling and paradoxical because it seems that if one can be proud of one’s virtue, then one will lack the virtue of humility, and if one cannot be proud of the virtue one has, one will be unaware of oneself, or one’s good features, which are a form of irrationality and contrary to intellectual virtue. Henry Sidgwick observed that “it is generally said that Humility prescribes a low opinion of our own merits.” Sidgwick’s comment reflects some common-use features of humility and anticipates Driver’s account of modesty (and humility). He continues: “And it would seem just as irrational to underrate ourselves as to overrate.” Still it does seem that it is possible to be proud of one’s virtue, at least of having some of the virtues. It certainly seems that one could be proud of one’s courage or of one’s honesty if courage or honesty were part of one’s pride ideal, and clearly courage and honesty, as well as other virtues, like temperance or generosity, could be part of one’s pride ideal.

Can one be proud of one’s humility? In fact we might ask: Can we even say “I am humble”? Garcia notes that there is something quite odd “in proclaiming >I am humble.” We might observe that the words “I am humble” seem odd because they would appear to be used to make a claim (or for “proclaiming,” to use Garcia’s term), and such a claim (or proclamation) most naturally would occur in the service of, if not unmitigated bragging, self-assertion, to which humility in one expression is opposed. Sidgwick says:

The deeper humility that represses the claim of personal merit even in the saint belongs to the strict self-examination, the continual sense of imperfection, the utter reliance on strength not his own, which characterize the inner moral life of the Christian

Note that Sidgwick sees that humility is opposed to the claim of personal merit. Perhaps, though, these words B “I am modest” or “I am humble” B might express an unsolicited realization about oneself. Are they then deeply at odds with modesty or humility? Not so obviously. St. Teresa of Avila says, however, that the virtues of humility and detachment “have the property of hiding themselves from one who possesses them” so that one never “sees them” nor can one “believe” one has them. Teresa goes on to say that one who possesses these virtues is “forever trying to obtain them, and thus [one] perfects them in [oneself] more and more.” If Teresa is right, then the humble person cannot realize B come to see B that she is humble, but Teresa does surely allow that the humble person can realize that “My humility is imperfect,” which allows a recognition of a degree of humility. Furthermore, we might observe, this latter recognition is not at odds with having a low estimate of one’s importance, one of the common-use features of humility.

Also relevant here is the distinction between self-aggrandizing proclamation or claim-making on the one hand and on the other hand the confession or statement of a strength or virtue
without self-aggrandizement. Imagine that a rock climber high up on a rock face is in danger. Several climbers at the bottom of the rock see his predicament, and all are ready to help. If one volunteers by saying, “I am the best one to make the ascent, I am more experienced,” this need not be an infraction of humility. It might be a simple, true statement and even a reminder of what the other climbers know. Admittedly it is hard to imagine an analogous setting in which one would confess in this way humility. It is not so hard, though, to imagine one’s confessing the imperfection of one’s humility.

So one can recognize one’s virtue and realize and confess one’s imperfect humility without being proud of one’s virtue or one’s humility. And one can be proud of one’s virtue. For it certainly seems that one could be proud of one’s courage or of one’s honesty, temperance, or generosity, if having any of these virtues is part of one’s pride ideal. The question remains, Can one be proud of one’s humility? Garcia B reflecting on Benjamin Franklin’s concern that Aeven if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it [his pride], I should probably be proud of my humility” B asks, AMight someone be proud of her humility?” and replies, APerhaps so.” In the same vein Montaigne said, AOne may be humble out of pride.” Garcia, Franklin, and Montaigne seem to be right. Allowing the polythetic nature of the concept of humility, so that humility can be in the form of, for instance, one’s having a low estimating of one’s good features or not claiming all of one’s desert, it is clear that one can be proud of these expressions of humility, for they, and other expressions of humility, might be part of one’s pride ideal. Only when the expression of humility is not being proud would being proud of one’s humility be ruled out. Perhaps it would not be ruled out logically, but it is ruled out by psychological, moral, and spiritual coherence. It is not denied, however, that one can be proud of not being proud at the cost of psychological tension and a severely divided moral and spiritual consciousness.

Aquinas said that humility is a moral virtue. Many others would agree, as would Garcia and all those who see humility as a morally valuable trait. As we have seen, there are various ways of being humble, and this means that there are various possible ways of having the moral virtue of humility: one can have the moral virtue of humility by, for instance, consistently having a low estimate of one’s merit or, alternatively, by consistently avoiding self-assertion, and so on. Consequently one can be proud of one’s moral virtue of humility in any of various forms it might take, unless the expression of the humility that comprises the virtue is not being proud.

The pride-shame axis

The second contrast of concern is that between humility and the pride-shame axis. For Hume, as well as for Aquinas, humility and pride are opposites. And this is right: they are opposed. Yet pride and shame are also opposed, and as Gabriele Taylor says, it is more plausible that shame, and not humility, Ais the polar opposite of emotional pride.”

Shame in its primary and self-directed sense is better than humility as the polar opposite of pride, for shame and pride, though opposites, are both grounded in self-concern on the same axis of self-concern, as humility is not. Both shame and pride relate to the Aself,” as Hume says correctly of pride. He also says this of humility (which he wrongly takes as pride’s polar opposite); he should have said this of shame, pride’s true polar opposite. Pride and shame relate to the Aself” not only in the sense that the Asubjects’ of pride (and shame) in some way relate to oneself (one’s abilities, one’s house, one’s parents’ social standing), but also in the sense that
they are self-consciously of concern to oneself, which is why they are in one’s pride ideal.

Humility is very different. Humility is opposed to pride B the first contrast. Also it is opposed to either a reaction of pride or a reaction of shame, the two poles of the pride-shame axis B the second contrast. Shame as much as pride reflects and is grounded in self-concern (as are other states on this axis, such as conceit and selfishness). In contradistinction to shame, humility, as a state free from self-concern in one of its deeper expressions, if not its deepest expression, is in that expression opposed to both self-concerned reactions and to the axis of self-concern itself. As an analogy, consider winning at war being the polar opposite of losing at war. A moral rejection of all war is also opposed to losing at war; however, a moral rejection of war is as well opposed to winning at war, for it is at a deeper level morally opposed to engaging in war at all. Humility is opposed to pride, but it is more deeply opposed to engaging life in terms of the self-concerned states of pride and shame at all.

If humility were opposed only to pride, as shame is, then like shame it would be a state of self-consciousness and self-concern. It is perhaps something like the perception that humility is opposed to all forms of self-concern that led Meister Eckhart and others to want the self to be nothing. Eckhart tells us that “a perfect humility proceeds from annihilation of self.” In the last century Simone Weil similarly regarded the self or herself as Anothing.” Roberts and Wood, without saying that the self is nothing, are alive to the absence of self-concern in humility when they observe that self-effacement is different from humility. Self-effacement, unlike humility, they note, shows a preoccupation with [one]self,” leading to one’s saying, “I am no good,” “I am unworthy,” and so on, with a focus on oneself. So too for abasement and self-degradation, we should observe, to the extent their focus is on oneself. For Roberts and Wood, as we have seen, humility Aas opposed to vanity” is an unconfusion with the opinion of others and hence, they reason, with one’s Astatus.” They have in mind the status one has in the eyes of others. We can add Aor in one’s own eyes.”

If humility and the pride-shame axis of self-concern are operative as core contrasts, so that humility in this expression excludes both pride and shame, then shame would not be the response to a failure in humility or to other failures. Failure in exterior or interior behavior would instead result in dismay, sadness, downheartedness, guilt, or an awareness of having sinned, of having violated one’s relationship to another or to God, none of which must by its nature be tied to self-concern and a pride ideal.

Let us ask again, Can one be proud of one’s humility? Earlier it was argued that one can be, given the polythetic nature of the concept of humility, except that one cannot be proud of one’s humility when it is expressed as not being proud. Here, however, the question being asked is focused on a particular way of being humble. It asks, Can one be proud of one’s humility when humility on the one hand and the pride-shame axis of self-concern on the other hand are the operative core contrasts? Put another way the question is: Can one be proud of one’s humility when its expression is the absence of self-concern? To this question the answer must be in the negative. If one could be proud of one’s humility in this expression of humility, then one would have to have a reaction of self-concern (pride) to a state requiring freedom from self-concern (humility). And, again, though this may not be ruled out logically, it is ruled out by psychological, moral, and spiritual coherence.
While humility can be expressed in a number of ways, the more profound expression of humility is one that spontaneously and naturally excludes pride as a self-concerned reaction (and as well other self-concerned reactions, in particular that of shame). The person who is humble and has the moral virtue of humility in this way is not one who struggles to be humble in order to meet a pride ideal. This humble person, with a humility that naturally excludes pride, is not proud as a child at play is not concerned with reputation.

When humility is opposed to pride, so that its expression is not being proud, or when humility, as a state free of self-concern, is opposed to the pride-shame axis of self-concern, then humility in this or these expressions excludes pride. At the same time we should appreciate that pride is distinguishable from:

a) awareness of strengths and abilities
b) focused effort, diligently applying oneself to an effort
c) having definite goals

Thus being aware of one’s mountain-climbing ability, focusing on developing it, and having the goal of developing this ability do not individually or in conjunction amount to taking pride in one’s mountain climbing ability. By contrast one would take pride in one’s mountain climbing ability if it were part of one’s pride ideal, and one would do so even if one were unaware of one’s true ability, did not make a special effort to develop this ability, and did not have developing this ability as a definite goal one pursued. The same comments mutatis mutandis hold for working for the relief of world hunger and even having humility in a number of its expressions.

IV. HUMILITY AND RELIGION

Aquinas, as we have noted, says that pride is Adirectly contrary” to the virtue of humility; and, as we have noted, he also says that Athe sinfulness of pride of its very nature is most grievous. For it outmatches other sins in the turning away from God. . . .” In both the Jewish and Christian traditions humility is deeply rooted as a part of the proper relationship to God. In the Psalms we find, Athough the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar” (Ps. 138.6). What does the Lord require of us? Micah answers that it is Ato do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6.8). And Jesus says, ATruly, I say to you, unless you turn and become as children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 18. 3-4), and he entreats us to Atake my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gently and lowly in heart” (Mt. 11. 29). In the Qur’an too humility is enjoined (Qur’an 16.48-49 and 57.16).

What is the character of religious humility or of humility in a religious understanding? In medieval characterizations humility is at times presented as self-abasement or experiencing yourself as filth. Such characterizations are in danger of making humility rule out self-respect. However we need not go along with medieval characterizations to see that religiously, within the theistic traditions, humility has an abiding character. While it seems right to maintain that humility has the same abiding character in the three Western theistic traditions, and mutatis mutandis in nontheistic traditions, here Christian sources will be used to document that character. First, religious humility is essentially in opposition to pride and to the pride-shame
axis of self-concern. Second, (in theistic traditions) humility’s turning from self-concern corresponds to a turning toward God. Overarching and integrating these elements there is a third signal feature of religious humility. Central to religious humility is an experiential or cognitive element. Some, in fact, have affirmed an experiential or cognitive element in all humility, religious or not.

Vance G. Morgan, though he is concerned with religious humility, finds a cognitive element of recognition in all humility. He says that Ahumility is directed away from oneself and is a virtue that arises from a recognition of and attunement to a reality that is other and greater than oneself.” On this point he is in essential agreement with Iris Murdoch, whom he quotes: AThe humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they really are.” In fact for Murdoch, AWe all, not only can but have to, experience and deal with a transcendent reality,” although that transcendent reality for Murdock may be Athe resistant otherness of other persons, other things, history, the natural world, the cosmos.” For Murdoch, in humility (or not) we experience and confront things as they are, as a multiple Atranscendent reality,” but for her the Atranscendent” is not God or a religious reality.

A cognitive aspect of humility holds for some nonreligious instances or expressions of humility. A rock climber looking up at the height and sheer face of the granite rock she is to climb may come to a new humility regarding her climbing ability, advanced as it is, in the light of her recognition of what the climb will demand. Some of the common-use features of humility that we noted indicate a cognitive element, such as (6) having or showing consciousness of one’s defects, and some of the philosophical accounts of humility do as well, such as Norvin Richards” account, which is in part Ahaving a proper perspective on [one]self.” Nancy Snow says, in accord with (6), ATo be a humble person is to recognize your limitations, to take them seriously, and thereby to foster a realism in attitudes and behavior regarding self and others.” However, while there is a cognitive aspect in some expressions of humility, a cognitive aspect need not be present in other expressions of humility, such as (2) the absence of self-assertion or (5) claiming little as one’s desert, at least when no belief has been formed as to one’s desert. A cognitive element is not necessary to all nonreligious expressions of humility, even when it is a moral virtue, but a cognitive element is necessary for the religious virtue of humility.

Authors writing from a religious perspective often find in humility an experience or recognition of a transcendent in a clearly religious sense. John Hick gives a distinctive place to religious experience of the transcendent in his religious pluralism. For Hick Adivine Reality” is experienced in all the major religious traditions, both theistic and nontheistic, although it is experienced and conceived differently in these traditions according to their different cultures. Hick judges that religious salvation or liberation is taking place in all the major religions, and while its specific form varies its general form remains the same: a change from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Hick does not speak of this transformation as involving humility, but he might have. and those undergoing this transformation in the theistic religions experience a changed life-orientation away from self and toward God.

Aquinas, who was clear that pride is Adirectly contrary” to humility, was also clear about there being a cognitive element in humility. He says Ahumility essentially lies in the appetite, and restrains its inordinate urge for things which are above us. Yet its rule lies in cognition . . . in
Not reckoning ourselves to be above what we are. The principle and root of both is the reverence we bear towards God.” Here is the idea that the virtue of humility involves a recognition or a “reckoning” of our position in relation to other things and especially to God, and a consequent restraining of reactions that are not congruent with that recognition.

For John Cottingham humility is “putting oneself last.” In accord with the parable of the wedding guest (Lk.14.10) humility involves not “striding up to the place of honor,” which implies, Cottingham suggests, a “consciousness of one’s own defects,” a “lack of anxious concern” about status, “a recognition that one is but one among many,” and a “recognition” that one’s gifts, if such they be, are not ultimately of one’s own making.” Some of these elements echo both other biblical parables and common-use features of humility, and some are close to the philosophical analyses of humility that we have noted, such as humility being an unconcern with others’ opinions. The last element is a recognition that one’s gifts are not of one’s own making like Aquinas’ just noted characterization, indicates a cognitive aspect in religious humility that is essentially an awareness of God and of one’s relation to God.

Cottingham speaks of a recognition, while Aquinas speaks of a cognition rooted in a reverence for God. Hick speaks of experiencing religious Reality as God (in theistic settings). In each case a cognitive aspect of religious humility is explicitly or implicitly identified.

An element of the cognitive aspect of religious humility is knowledge of oneself. In The Cloud of Unknowing a true knowledge and experience of yourself as you are, a wretch, filth, far worse than nothing” was said to be humility. St Bernard of Clairvaux recognized the same cognitive aspect of humility when he said of humility’s opposite, pride, or pride of mind,” that it is a great beam which is bloated rather than heavy, swollen rather than solid, and it blocks the mind’s eye and blots out the light of truth, so that if your mind is full of it you cannot see yourself as you really are.” As we might expect, Bernard’s characterization of humility is medieval, like that in The Cloud of Unknowing. Their medieval characterizations of humility, however, do not affect either the recognition in The Cloud of the cognitive aspect of humility in one’s coming to a true knowledge and experience of yourself as you are” or Bernard’s recognition of the cognitive aspect of humility in one’s coming to see yourself as you really are” by virtue of his recognition of the blinding nature of pride. For Bernard and the other Christian writers consulted it seems that there are, in the Christian tradition, three elements in the cognitive aspect of humility: a recognition of oneself as one is, a recognition of God, and a recognition of one’s relation to God. In Judaism and Islam too, for both of which a relation to God is central, it would seem that the same three cognitive elements are present in humility as much as they are in Christianity. Allowing that humility is a religious virtue in other nontheistic traditions, such as Buddhism, as we should, this cognitive aspect would relate to a religious reality that is not theistically conceived.

The cognitive aspect of humility holds for some nonreligious instances or expressions of humility. The rock climber we imagined looking up at the height and sheer face of the granite rock she is to climb may come to a new humility regarding her climbing ability due to her recognition of what the climb will demand. But while it may hold for some instances of nonreligious humility, it arguably is an integral or essential part of religious humility, for which the transcendent is God in the theistic traditions.
In the theistic traditions religious humility is understood to have within itself an awareness of God, as well as of oneself as one is, and of oneself in relation to God. Given this awareness, humility on the part of those with it is not only proper, being a virtue, but realistic. Given this awareness, religious humility is as realistic as the humility of a rock climber who recognizes the daunting majesty of the rock face she is about to climb is realistic. Perhaps religious humility is also pragmatic, useful, and fulfilling. Whether it is or not, from the standpoint of the self-understanding of the religious (or those among the religious who aspire to humility), religious humility is realistic, and if its internal awareness is true awareness those with religious humility ultimately are truly realistic.

V. FINAL COMMENT

Summing up, what we have seen, or what has been argued, is this: Given the polythetic character of the concept of humility there are various ways of being humble: one can in nonreligious ways be humble by, for instance, not claiming one’s due or by having a low estimate of one’s merit. Humility has a core contrast with pride and the pride-shame axis; yet the polythetic character of the concept of humility allows one to take pride not only in one’s virtue, but even in one’s humility unless the expression of humility is not being proud. The polythetic nature of humility thus allows one to be proud of having the moral virtue of humility, unless the form of humility in the virtue has as its expression not being proud. Humility, in the expression required for religious humility, is different. Religious humility has as an essential element a core contrast not only with pride but also, more deeply, a core contrast with the pride-shame axis of self-concern, and these contrasts rule out being proud of one’s humility in its religious expression. In some but not all instances of nonreligious humility there is a cognitive aspect. But for religious humility a cognitive aspect is integral. Humility as a religious virtue requires a recognition of a greater reality, God or a religious transcendent, in relation to which a proper and realistic response is humility, and in the light of that recognition the expression of humility required for religious humility, is a turning away from self and self-concern.

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NOTES

. See for instance the OED and The Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd ed.
. Austin, Sense and Sensibilia, p. 71.
. ST II-II, q. 162, a. 6, Reply; St Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, vol. 44, p. 139.
. ST II-II, q. 161, a. 5, Reply and Reply to Obj. 2; St Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, vol. 44, pp. 105 and 107.
1976) p 60. He discusses model identities in relation to shame. The term “ego ideal” is used by psychologists, specifically by Gerhart Piers, Milton B. Singer, and Léon Wurmser. Gerhart Piers and Milton B. Singer, *Shame and Guilt* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1953), p. 11 and Léon Wurmser, *The Mask of Shame* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) pp. 72-73. Psychologists are interested in the ego ideal primarily in its connection to shame and shame experience, and for them it is importantly formed by parental expectations (Piers and Singer, 14; Wurmser, p 72). At the same time they allow that an ego ideal may contain “layers of later identifications” (Piers and Singer, p. 14; their emphasis) or include other values, besides family values, depending on cultural and sub-cultural ideals and on “the individual’s genesis” (Wurmser, p. 74).


Gabriele Taylor makes essentially this point, although she does not use the category a pride ideal.” *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, p. 43.


Jay Newman cites some of these and other biblical passages to make the point that humility has a place in AJewishBChristianBWestern morality.” *Humility and Self-Realization,* *Journal of*
Meister Eckhart says that A perfect humility is always abasing itself below all created things’’.

Meister Eckhart, A On Detachment’’ in Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentarites, Treatises, and Defense, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A and Bernard McGinn (New York, Ramsey, and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1981) p. 286. The author of The Cloud of Unknowing says, A . . . if this device [cowering beneath your thoughts and giving yourself up to God] is properly understood in its subtlety, it is nothing else but a true knowledge and experience of yourself as you are, a wretch, filth, far worse than nothing. This knowledge and experience is humility.’’


Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (New York and London: Penguin books, 1992) p. 268 (Murdoch’s emphasis). Quoted by Morgan on p. 313 of AHumility and the Transcendent.” While Murdoch allows that A[we] yearn for the transcendent, for God,” yet, AIn picturing the transcendent we transform it into idols, which we then realize to be . . . just things among others here below.” And she says, AWe need a theology which can continue without God.”


ST II-II, q 161, a. 6, Reply; St Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, vol 44, p. 111.


See n. 34.
. I am grateful to the reviewer at the American Philosophical Review for very helpful suggestions.