

# **The Case for Humility**

## **By**

### **Daniel E. White July 17, 2023**

One internet source lists 713 antonyms for the word “humility.” Another source cites the Bible; its list of opposites for humility is one: pride.

Humility has emerged for me in two different contexts in recent weeks. The first has come from a book Judy and I are reading together, “An Immense World,” by Ed Yong, subtitled “How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us.” The latter phrase captures the essence of the book.

Yong introduces his work with an imagined menagerie of living creatures populating a gym. One by one, Yong describes his best understanding of how each creature perceives the environment, allowing for its own limited capacities to perceive. A human woman is among the array which ranges in size from a mosquito to an elephant.

The chapters that follow isolate the various senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell—by which the creatures take in information that helps them interpret their environment. A picture emerges that might seem obvious to us in 2023 but was not so well-accepted for much of human history.

That picture: people have forever been making assumptions about their place in the evolutionary system that have diminished or dismissed the superiority of specific senses in other species in interpreting their surroundings.

One capacity we humans have going for us is our possession of many senses in moderate amounts. Being sensory polymaths might well be a key to our capacity to dominate other species. But we have only begun to understand that, when it comes to the acuity of specific senses, other species are better than us.

It isn’t surprising that our kind have thought we are the top of the line in all regards. It has taken some humility for humans to accept that we can benefit from understanding the strengths in other species, that we are part of a larger picture of life on earth.

The second instance came from Professor of Classical Archaeology, Naoise MacSweeney’s article, “Why the Idea of Western Civilization is More Myth than History,” in “Literary Hub: May 23, 2023. “She asserts “... the real history of the West is much richer and more complex than the traditional narrative of Western Civilization acknowledges. It is not a golden thread but a golden tapestry—in which strands of diverse people, cultures, and ideas have been woven together over the centuries.”

She notes that “classical antiquity” came through the ages in more ways than just the medieval European monks copying classical texts. People in Sudan, northern India and Pakistan, and especially Baghdad, the greatest center of medieval classical sciences, all contributed to MacSweeney’s golden tapestry.

So where did the myth begin? MacSweeney contends that the colonial adventures of European powers parallels in time the rise of the notion of “Western Civilization.” New World America

shared in the construction of the mythology by creating a system of government attributed to the Greeks and Romans without mentioning that the two civilizations also nurtured slavery, empire, and oppression.

The beliefs of the Founding Fathers continued a narrative that suggested that well-to-do European men living in America, at odds with well-to-do Englishmen living in the “old world,” were reviving ancient virtues, a positive good. When America rose to be a Great Power on the world stage, that seemed to validate those virtues, and its citizens assumed themselves to be superior as a result.

It isn't surprising that a collection of human beings would write a version of history that justifies, over time, their position at the top. In how many other cultures do the inhabitants regard themselves as "the people," a variation on "the chosen ones," the rightful occupiers of a superior position, at least in their own minds? "Tribal" allegiance is not unique.

Yong would observe that we cannot really know if other species regard their kind as the top of the heap. The point is humans do and have done for a long time. This is not a time, though, for self-flagellation. We can mitigate any negative effects with a modicum of humility.

We have been cautioned in the past. Hamlet delivered "what a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable..." and concluded "And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights me not..." We might seem like hot stuff but in the end, we are just dust.

Shakespeare would have known Genesis 3:19: "Dust you are and to dust you will return." Humbling.

James Madison wrote in *Federalist 51*: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."

People of a Certain Age, if a person hears that she is dust or that he is not an angel to be trusted, wouldn't it be understandable that they would create a history that supported the idea that they were at the top, whether that were true or not? We're only human.

I'm an optimist, though. I think we as a species are learning. Maybe we can nurture in our species the virtue of humility to stand strong against the 713 antonyms and especially against the one.

We all might get along better if we did.

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