

# **Ourselves in Time: Intergenerational Humility, Democracy, and Future Others**

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Intergenerational justice requires us to balance the legitimate concerns of the present with the potential interests of the future. It may be permissible to discount the potential interests of the future to some extent, because of the uncertainty associated with looking farther and farther into the future — but all adequate accounts of intergenerational justice have to strike *some* balance between the concerns of the present and the interests of the future. Balance is required in this context because it is difficult to justify assigning a higher moral status to some generations as opposed to others. From a moral perspective we all have equal value regardless of our position in time. The challenges of intergenerational justice — which have inspired a vast body of literature (see, e.g., Gosseries 2007; Laslett and Fishkin 1992; Mazor 2010; Parfit 1984; Rawls 1999; Sikora and Barry 1978; Tremmel 2009)— are important because we often find it difficult to maintain the requisite balance between our own interests and those of the future.

In the first half of this paper, I argue that the way we think about ourselves in relation to others matters for how we think about the problems of intergenerational *injustice*, whether we see them as problems, and what we (might) be willing to do to address them. I situate this argument in a discussion of humility because, according to modern conceptions of the concept, humility involves consciously refraining from overvaluing the self in relation to others (Tangney 2002). In this paper, I employ modern conceptions of humility to discuss what might be called “intergenerational humility.” If humility involves making accurate assessments of our own value in relation to (contemporary) others, intergenerational humility involves making accurate assessments of our own place in time, and our own value in relation to both past and future others. This way of thinking about the self — as a temporally situated entity — is not new: many thinkers and cultures have emphasized the social, political, moral, and epistemological

connections that exist between generations. By contrast, theories of liberal individualism tend to abstract the self away from its social, political, cultural, *and temporal* contexts. The problem with this approach, is that those who are primarily concerned only with themselves will have few reasons to think past their own limited time horizons.

Following Edmund Burke (and others) I argue that appreciating our own place in time — and recognizing the debts that we owe to the past — can help motivate us to care about the future. When we cultivate our capacities to think outside of ourselves, and thereby recognize our relative value in relation to contemporary others, we are compelled (for reasons of consistency) to also consider our place among past and future others. We are compelled to do so because time is irrelevant to the moral status of individuals.

In the second half of this paper, I discuss connections between humility and democracy. Humility has been conceived of as a democratic (or deliberative) good because it is associated with a willingness to listen to others and a capacity to consider perspectives that are different from (or contrary to) one's own (Button 2005; Griffin 2011; Scott 2014).

Humility may be a useful (or necessary) democratic good, but it is also worth thinking about the relationship between humility and democracy the other way around. I argue that democracy may be an important means of cultivating humility, especially in societies that are informed by principles of liberal individualism. Ideally, democracy empowers individuals to help make collective decisions, and it is thus consistent with principles of individualism and autonomy. Importantly, effective democratic processes (such as deliberation) also (ideally) expose individuals to the claims, perspectives, and considerations of others who may have very different (or opposed) political objectives from their own.

But effective democratic processes also require individuals (and groups) to reconcile their differences if they want to get things done. In democratic environments where participants are (approximately) equally empowered, individuals and groups may be compelled to negotiate with those they disagree with, and they may be forced to make concessions. In effective deliberative environments, participants may be compelled to frame their claims in ways that others might plausibly accept, and they must remain open to the possibility that their ideas or perspective may be (effectively) challenged by others. In these circumstances, individuals (and groups) may be

compelled to make accurate assessments of their own abilities and limitations, and they may be forced to reassess the relative importance of their own claims in relation to others. Each of these responses, forced by the exigencies of (good) democratic practices, are definitional aspects of modern conceptions of humility (see, e.g., Tangney 2002).

In the last section of the paper, I discuss how the two parts of my overall argument fit together. Can democracy help cultivate both humility and intergenerational humility? I think it can, at least in certain circumstances. If the conceptual connections between humility and intergenerational humility are as strong as I think they are — if it is conceptually difficult (or disingenuous) to maintain a sense of humility in relation to contemporary others without maintaining a similar sense of humility with respect to past and future others — then *any* means of cultivating humility should also be a means of cultivating intergenerational humility. But there is, I think, a more direct connection between democracy and intergenerational humility. If democracy exposes us to different political points of view, it will also expose us to different temporal perspectives when the temporal dimensions of public issues (such as budget deficits, public pension plans, or environmental policies) are recognized and made explicit. Indeed, there may be strategic advantages for political actors to frame their claims in ways that make them (or make them appear to be) consistent with the potential interests of the future. If this is the case, democratic actors may be forced by others to reconcile their own claims with the potential interests of the future, especially in robust deliberative environments where bad arguments and disingenuous claims can be effectively challenge.

This may be a surprising conclusion because democracy is (rightly or wrongly) often thought to be more effective at dealing with near-term issues than long-term problems (see, e.g., Healy and Malhotra 2009; Ophuls 2011; Shearman and Smith 2007; Thompson 2010). In contrast, if what I say here has any merit, good democratic practices — that expose individuals (and groups) to differences *and* force them to work through their differences together — might actually help complex (liberal) societies strike a better balance between their own concerns and the potential interests of the future.

## Humility as a Political Good

Today, humility is not widely recognized as a political or democratic good — and it is not hard to understand why. Traditionally, humility was associated with a lowly opinion of the self. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines humility as: "The quality of having a modest or low view of one's importance." Humility in the Christian tradition, as defined by St. Augustine, for example, is associated with looking away from the self, and specifically looking upward towards God. On this account, humility requires submission in recognition of the greatness of God; it requires lowering oneself while simultaneously lifting oneself up through an exultation of God.<sup>1</sup>

As might be expected, many political philosophers, such as Machiavelli and Nietzsche, tend to think of humility as a political liability instead of a virtue. For Machiavelli and Nietzsche, humility is a liability because it is likely to make political actors weak and vulnerable. Humility, from this perspective, represents the opposite of the skill, strength of will, self-importance, and ruthlessness that may be necessary to succeed in political affairs.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, humility is precisely the sort of (Christian) virtue that Machiavelli was thinking about when he argued that political leaders should learn how not to be good.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to imagine how a "low view of one's importance" might be refashioned into a political or democratic good, but there are aspects of the concept of humility that have made it attractive to both positive psychologists and some political theorists. Indeed, modern psychological conceptions of humility are different from traditional accounts of humility in at least one important respect: they do not emphasize lowliness or meekness. According to these

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<sup>1</sup> As Augustine explains in *The City of God*, "it is good to have the heart lifted up, yet not to one's self, for this is proud, but to the Lord, for this is obedient, and can be the act only of the humble. There is, therefore, something in humility which, strangely enough, exalts the heart, and something in pride which debases it. This seems, indeed, to be contradictory, that loftiness should debase and lowliness exalt. But pious humility, by making us subject to God, exalts us" (Book XIV, p. 461). For a recent (positive) account of Christian, contemporary, and confusion conceptions of humility see Rushing (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche (1889), for example, memorably compared the humble person to a worm. "A worm curls when it is trodden on. Clever move. By doing so it reduces the probability of being trodden on again. In the language of morality: *humility*" (p. 8).

<sup>3</sup> As Machiavelli argues in *the Discourses* "classical religion only defied men who had already been heaped with worldly glories, men such as generals of armies and rulers of states. Our religion, by contrast, glorifies men who are humble and contemplative, rather than those who do great deeds. In fact, it regards humility, self-abasement, and contempt for worldly goods as the supreme virtues, while classical religion valorizes boldness of spirit, strength of body, and all the other qualities that make men redoubtable" (p. 168).

accounts, humility involves making accurate assessments of the self in relation to others, or in relation to the larger world or universe (Tangney 2002). A humble person is one who is willing to listen to the concerns of others, learn from her mistakes, and make accurate assessments of her own talents, virtues, and importance. A humble person does not overemphasize her talents or engage in self-aggrandizing behavior. That is the opposite of humility. But humility does not involve self-deprecating behavior either. According to modern conceptions of the concept, humility is a way of being (or thinking) that strikes a balance between (unjustified) elevations of the self and (equally unjustified) devaluations of the self.

Humility may be politically attractive if it helps political actors engage with each other more productively by, for example, encouraging them to keep their own sense of self-importance in check (see, e.g., Button 2005; Griffin 2011; Rushing 2013; Scott 2014.) On some level, humility may be viewed as an antidote to hyper-partisanship, ideological entrenchment, and destructive or dismissive self-assuredness.

If humility is a political virtue (or if it *can* be a political virtue) what sort of virtue is it? Following Aristotle, Philippa Foot (1978) claims that some virtues are valuable because they are both good (on some level) and hard to follow. These virtues (of which humility is one) may be viewed as correctives because they help counteract tendencies that are less good but easier to follow. As Foot points out, “there is, for instance, a virtue of industriousness only because idleness is a temptation; and of humility only because men tend to think too well of themselves” (p. 9).

Humility as a corrective virtue may be viewed as a political good because arrogance, self-aggrandizement, and hubris are forms of shutting down. If we are too confident that we are right, then we will have few reasons to listen to the concerns of others, especially those with whom we disagree. And when we overvalue ourselves, we necessarily undervalue others. Humility, by contrast, is about keeping one’s own place in the world in perspective in relation others (Tangney 2002). We may have legitimate concerns and interests, but others are likely to have them too. Humility helps correct for the sort of overvaluing that is likely to blind us to the (potentially) legitimate concerns of others.

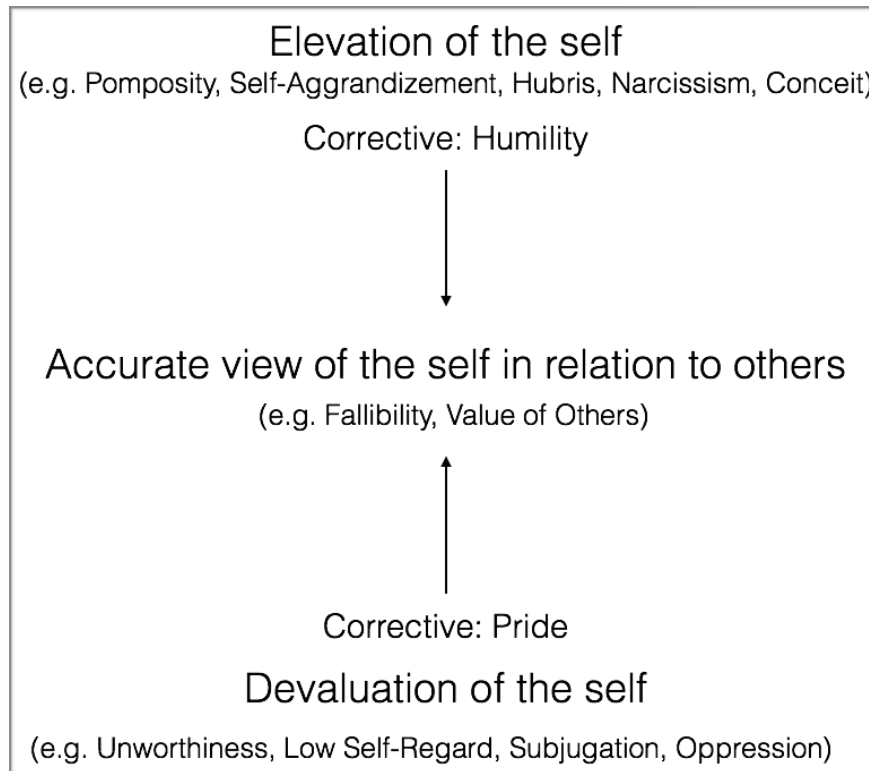
On this account, humility is a collective good because it would be good for everyone if each political actor has the fortitude to keep his or her self-aggrandizing tendencies in check. But humility is not necessarily the corrective that is needed in all political circumstances. Humility is required to help keep those with some degree of power or influence from becoming too sure of themselves, but it is clearly not an antidote to oppression, marginalization, or a lack of power and influence. More often, what the marginalized need is precisely the opposite of humility: pride. Indeed many political movements that aim to enhance the power of otherwise marginalized groups or individuals — such as the gay rights movement, the civil rights movement, or more recently Black Lives Matter — are powered by messages of pride not humility.

But humility is a political good that is relevant even to those who are currently oppressed or powerless. When we are down, pride (or something like it) may be required to lift us up again, but humility is nevertheless needed to keep us from rising too high, becoming too sure of ourselves, or failing to consider the concerns or perspectives of others. The conceptual relationship between pride and humility as correctives to self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement, respectively, is illustrated in Figure 1. Both pride and humility are political goods (and corrective virtues) insofar as they can help political actors maintain accurate views of their self-worth or relevance in relation to others.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As a practical matter it is worth asking whether humility as a corrective virtue is likely to have any relevance in the real world of politics. Those who are powerful may become increasingly self-absorbed and arrogant simply because they are powerful. Furthermore, expressing humility in this context would mean recognizing the legitimate claims those without power — and that is, of course, the first step toward undermining one's own power. This is an important concern that I will answer later in the paper where I discuss the relationship between humility and democracy. Nevertheless, the question of whether the powerful are likely (or not) to express humility is an empirical question and I am operating, here, on a normative level. I have argued that humility may be a useful political good insofar as it can be a corrective to hubris, narcissism, arrogance, and other ways of being that are associated with closing off and shutting out the perspectives or concerns of others.

**Figure 1.**  
**Humility and Pride as Correctives for Self Elevation and Self Devaluation**



### **Intergenerational Humility**

The idea that humility might function as a corrective virtue is relevant to questions of intergenerational justice. As explained above, intergenerational justice requires balancing the legitimate concerns of the present with the potential interests of the future. If we have an inflated sense of our own selves in relation to others, we are also likely to have an inflated (or under-examined) sense of the value, relevance, or importance of our own generations in relation to past and future others. As such, our conceptions of ourselves, and our views of ourselves *in time*, are likely to affect how we think about the challenges of intergenerational justice, whether we see them as problems, and how (or whether) we are willing to address them.

In general terms, there are two distinct challenges of intergenerational justice — each of which is relevant to different views of the self as a temporally situated entity. The first, less

familiar, challenge involves undervaluing the present for the (presumed) benefit of the future. The second challenge involves overvaluing the present at the expense of the future.

Each of these two challenges is ultimately rooted in how we think about ourselves in relation to present and future others. Conceptions of the self that devalue present people may be used to justify actions that require near-term sacrifices for a better (usually unattainable) future. Examples include individual acts of religious or political martyrdom, as well as collective movements such as Mao's "Great Leap Forward" in which some generations may be sacrificed for the (improbable) benefit of other, future generations. But even if such benefits to future generations *could* be guaranteed — and they cannot be — any actions or conceptions of the self that devalue present people in relation to other generations would be unacceptable from the perspective of intergenerational justice: devaluing the present is just as bad as devaluing the future if time is irrelevant to the moral status of individuals.

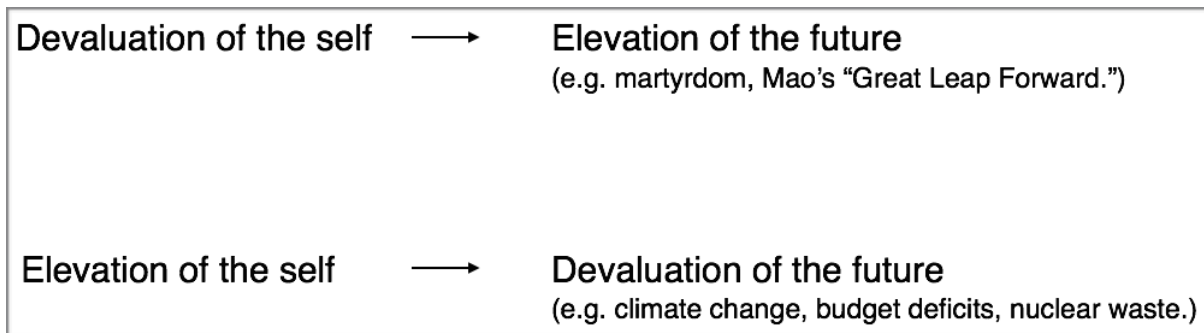
The second, and more familiar, challenge of intergenerational justice is also relevant to how we think about ourselves in relation to present and future others. If we overvalue ourselves in relation to others we also must, thereby, undervalue the interests and concerns of others, including future others. As such, overvaluations of the self may be associated with undervaluations of the future — and that is the challenge of intergenerational justice that is most pressing in modern liberal societies. Indeed, this challenge is evident in many of the political problems that we face including climate change, budget deficits, environmental pollution, and the production (and storage) of nuclear waste.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, although modern (Western) societies tend to suffer from generational hubris, those who revere constitutions as fixed constraints on contemporary action, rather than living documents that can be changed and adjusted by each generation, also thereby undervalue the wisdom or capacity of current generations to make their own decisions (see, e.g., Thompson 2010). A particularly clear example of this — which is rendered more complicated because it is bound up in contemporary politics and not *just* philosophical considerations — is the reverence that many powerful political actors have (or purport to have) for the principles articulated in and protected by the 2nd Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.



**Figure 2.**  
**The Two Challenges of Intergenerational Justice**



The two challenges of intergenerational justice are represented in Figure 2. It is worth pointing out, however, that these two challenges are not entirely symmetrical with respect to each other. Devaluations of the self are not a necessary or sufficient condition for overvaluing the future. Philosophical orientations that diminish or devalue the self could just as well produce feelings of disinterest, disassociation, or apathy. In that case, a devaluation of the self might become manifest as a lack of concern for both the present *and* the future.

By comparison, an elevation (or overvaluation) of the self is both a necessary and sufficient reason for devaluing the future: those who are only concerned about themselves will have few reasons to do anything for a future that they will not be a part of. It is for this reason that liberal theorists of intergenerational justice, such as John Rawls (1999), have typically found it difficult to motivate individuals to think past their own limited time horizons (see, also, Mazor 2010). Tellingly, Rawls was compelled to introduce “family ties” into his otherwise purely liberal theory of intergenerational justice. From behind the veil of ignorance, Rawls could not motivate individuals to think about the needs of future others without asserting that they should be viewed as members of a temporally situated community of others. Rawls chose the family as a community of shared interests, presumably because it is a form of community that is broadly acceptable within the tradition of liberalism itself — but it is nevertheless a concession that it is difficult (or impossible) to conceive of and justify intergenerational relations from a purely liberal perspective.

Modern conceptions of humility are relevant in this context because they involve striking a balance between an unjustified (and potentially dangerous) devaluation of self and an equally unjustified (and potentially dangerous) elevation of self. What is needed is a philosophical (or ontological) foundation for intergenerational justice that is predicated on what might be called “intergenerational humility.” If modern conceptions of humility involve keeping our own place in the world in perspective in relation to others, intergenerational humility involves keeping our place *in time* in perspective in relation to other generations. If humility involves conscientiously recognizing that we are part of a much larger universe of valuable things (including, perhaps, both animate and inanimate things), intergenerational humility involves recognizing that we are part of a small number of generations in a long succession of others, each of which must be accorded some value if we are to claim any value for ourselves. Intergenerational humility may be helpfully contrasted with “generational hubris” which involves placing unwarranted value on one’s own generation or moment in time, forgetting or ignoring the contributions of the past, and ignoring or heavily discounting the potential needs of the future.

Generational hubris (and its many philosophical and practical problems) can be exasperating for those who have a sense of intergenerational humility. Edmund Burke, for example, was palpably exasperated with the revolutionaries in France who believed (wrongly) that a single generation could successfully replace, with one swift motion, the whole organic structure of society with a new and better one. Burke believed that we cannot understand our own place in time without also appreciating the extent to which our welfare rests on a complex (and essentially unknowable) lattice of social, political, and epistemological goods that can only be built up over many, many generations. “Time” as Burke (1790) explained “is required to produce that union of minds which alone can produce all the good we aim at” (p. 281). This, I think, is a more profound point than Burke is normally given credit for making. It is not just that society is a distillation of ideas that were tried and tested in the past, but rather that we literally could not live well (or even survive) as individuals or groups without the wisdom and wealth that has been gathered by many previous generations and transmitted to us. From Burke’s perspective, it is therefore wholly inappropriate to value our own generation over others simply because we happen to exist. We are all in this together — even though we are not in it together at

the same time. It is the ultimate act of generational hubris to think that what we have achieved could be done without the help of other generations.

But something interesting happens when we (genuinely) recognize that what we can achieve very much depends on what previous generations have done for us. When we humbly admit that we have not, and cannot, do it all ourselves, it becomes more difficult to ignore the potential interests of the future. When we recognize our debts to the past, we are compelled (in a sense) to recognize our responsibility to the future because any other position would be either: 1) intellectually and morally inconsistent; or 2) predicated on an implausible assumption that *our* generations are special in some way, and that our wellbeing was the ultimate teleological aim of previous generations. It is more plausible to assume that our generations are *not* special in some ontologically significant way, and that the cooperation between generations should not (or must not) end with our own. If we have received some useful inheritance from the past (which we have) we therefore also have some reciprocal responsibility to the future. Burke's insight was to recognize that in admitting the debts we owe to the past, we must also admit that we have some responsibility toward the future. "People" as Burke famously said "will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors" (p. 119).

Many indigenous leaders have also articulated ideas that express a sense of intergenerational humility. Consider, for example, this quote from Charlie Patton who spoke to Canada's *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* in 1993:

The determination of Aboriginal people to retain their cultures goes beyond nostalgia for an historical way of life. It is expressed in a deep appreciation of timeless human values and a sense of obligation to continue to represent those values for the sake of future generations. In our language we call ourselves *ongwehonwe*. Some people say it means real people. I heard one man explain it in this way: It says that we are the ones that are living on the earth today, right at this time. We are the ones that are carrying the responsibility of our nations, of our spirituality, of our relationship with the Creator, on our shoulders. We have the mandate to carry that today, at this moment in time. Our languages, our spirituality and everything that we are was given to us and was carried before us by our ancestors, our grandparents who have passed on. When they couldn't carry it any longer and they went to join that spirit world, they handed it to us and they said: 'Now you are the real ones. You have to carry it.' Now they are in the spirit world. They are our past. Now we have a responsibility to carry that because we hear seven generations in the future. They are our future. They are the ones that are not yet born (Government of Canada 1993, p. 592).

According to this account, living generations are those who carry collective knowledge, wisdom, and traditions from the past to the future. We may be compelled to care about the future when we

recognize that we are part of — and have benefited from — a great succession of generations, each of which was tasked with carrying the knowledge and wisdom of humanity forward to the next generation. It is, of course, possible to independently decide that we should not bother ourselves with the future, but it is *more difficult* to justify ignoring the future when we recognize that each individual is situated in an intergenerational community of others and that the individual cannot be made sense of fully when removed from that community. We may think of ourselves *as individuals* but what we are *as individuals* very much depends on what previous generations have done to condition our contemporary options and environments, and thus to condition the essence of who we are in important ways.

In the above quote, Patton creates a compelling image of the present shouldering the knowledge and wisdom of the past and transferring it to the future. This image functions as a reminder for us to refrain from *overvaluing* our own generations, or seeing ourselves as individuals who are (or could be) removed from our social, political, cultural, or temporal context. When we view the self as a context-independent entity, we effectively remove ourselves not only from our contemporary communities but from the great intergenerational community as well.

But Patton also seems to assume (at least in this quote), that what is inherited from the past is likely to be valuable and beneficial. If it is not valuable on some fundamental level it would not have survived the tests of time. That makes sense. But it is worth noting that generations (and individuals) can, in principle, maintain a sense of intergenerational humility *and*, at the same time, criticize some (or even much) of what came before them. Indeed, criticism is central to the idea of transferring useful knowledge between generations. Criticism is essential in this context because no improvements can be made if generations do not question and test the knowledge and wisdom that they have received from previous generations.

Thus there is a difference between revering the past and appreciating one's own place in time. Burke is often thought to have expressed an unalloyed reverence for the past — which is then, in his hands, used to justify the status quo. There *is* a certain amount of reverence for the past in Burke's political thought, but he also recognized that measured and careful change is require for the (slow) advancement of humanity (such as it may be). He therefore placed as much

emphasize on evolutionary change as on conservation. As Burke (1790) argued, “the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure spirit of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement” (pp. 119-120). More generally, current generations may seek to change and improve whatever it was they inherited from the past, but they cannot (or should not) squander it by emphasizing their own interests and needs to the exclusion of others. On this account, we are (or should be) protectors of our inherited wealth (or wisdom) and not simply users or consumers of it. We might, nevertheless, use inheritances and improve them (if possible) but they must be passed on again as inheritances to others. It is generational hubris that works at cross-purposes to the cycle of advancement consisting of inheritance, conservation, improvement, and further transmission. Without some sense of our own place in time — without a conscious effort to nurture a sense of intergenerational humility — we are in danger of both disregarding the contributions of the past and failing to transmit what we have inherited (and improved) to future generations.

It is also worth noting that a principle of generational equality (or moral equivalency) does not in any way preclude the possibility that some generations may have special responsibilities that are unlike those faced by others generations. Those who find their culture threatened by imperialism, for example, may feel a special responsibility to help preserve their culture and transmit it to the next generation. And they may, for this reason, be given special recognition in the history of their culture. Likewise, and more generally, today’s generations may be thought of as shouldering a unique responsibility in comparison to other generations because we now know that we have an existential power *over* the future. That is to say, we have the power to both shape the future and destroy it completely. Nevertheless, this idea that some generations may have special responsibilities (Fritsch 2015), is consistent with a concept of intergenerational humility that grants equal value to each generation regardless of their position in time.

For those who have a sense of intergenerational humility, generational hubris — or a lack of concern for the both the past and the future — is a philosophical, moral, and social aberration that calls for an explanation. By contrast, for those who lack lack a sense of their own place in time, caring about the future is an aberration that calls for an explanation. In my view it is telling

that so much of the existing literature on intergenerational justice is about trying to explain *why* we should care about the future and not why we often fail to do so. I have argued that our failure to care about the future is rooted (at least in part) in our conceptions of the self. If we overvalue ourselves in relation to others we are also likely to overemphasize the value (and needs) of our own generations while neglecting the contributions of the past and the needs of the future. By contrast, maintaining an accurate (or appropriate) view of ourselves in relation to both contemporary others and the past, also compels us to recognize the value, contributions, and needs of future others.

### **Humility and Democratic Practice**

If intergenerational humility can help motivate us to care about the future (or at least take some responsibility for what happens *to* the future), it is essential to consider how (or whether) humility might be cultivated. Perhaps the most straightforward option is to cultivate humility at the level of cultural transmission. Li (2014), for example, has argued that societies informed by Confucian principles tend to place more emphasis on actively cultivating (and rewarding) humility when compared to societies that are informed by liberal principles of individualism. As the quote from Charlie Patton (above) makes clear, many indigenous societies actively strive to cultivate a sense of intergenerational humility by emphasizing the essential connections between individuals and between generations.<sup>6</sup> It may be desirable to cultivate humility at the level of cultural transmission, but this is both an inadequately easy answer to a difficult question, and an implausible option in societies that are informed by liberal principles of individualism — and myths about the greatness of self-made men and women. In this section of the paper, I argue that democracy has a special role to play in cultivating humility in societies that are informed by

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<sup>6</sup> There is, for example, a famous saying (of disputed providence) which is often attributed to a Ghanaian chief by the name of Nana Ofori Atta I: “I conceive that the land belongs to a vast family of whom many are dead, a few are living, and countless hosts are still unborn” (see, e.g., Amanor 2001, p. 25). Another example comes from James Tully’s description of indigenous conceptions of constitutionalism. As he explains: “In the Aboriginal and common-law system, [current constitutional agreements are] seen as one link in an endless chain, stretching back to what one’s ancestors have done before and forward to what one’s children will do in the future. The present link, while appropriate to the circumstances at hand, is in line with the whole chain as far as one can see. In addition, the link is always open to review and renegotiation in a future dialogue if it is not as fitting as it appeared at the time... Mohawks call the practice of meeting to review how well an agreement fits, either amending or reaffirming it, ‘repolishing’ the chain (Tully 1995, p. 135).

liberal principles of individualism. In the next section, I outline some of the ways that democracy may also help participants cultivate a sense of intergenerational humility.

The relationship between humility and democracy has been discussed by others. Button (2005), for example, has argued that humility should be thought of as a democratic virtue because it helps make productive democratic exchanges both possible and more likely. In Button's view, humility is particularly important in culturally (or politically) diverse societies where fundamental misunderstandings (or even conflicts) may occur when participants are primarily focused on their own concerns and thereby dismissive of or disinterested in the concerns of others. Similarly, Griffin (2011) and Scott (2014) have argued that humility is a deliberative virtue because it is associated with open-mindedness — which is, itself, required if we are to adequately consider the arguments or claims of others and adjust our own positions accordingly (when appropriate). According to these accounts, humility is an internal characteristic of individuals that has some value in the democratic sphere but that must (presumably) be cultivated elsewhere. In my view, we should also think about whether democratic (or deliberative) processes can help cultivate humility among those who participate in them.

In fact, democracy does something that most of our other forms of association do not do. Effective democratic processes expose us to the views and perspectives of others. But unlike other social practices (which may expose us to diversities of various sorts), democratic processes also force us to confront the challenges of making collective decisions with others who may be very different from ourselves, and who may have opposing objectives. Democracy is the only large-scale social practice that both exposes us to differences, and forces us to actively work through our differences to get things done at the social or political level.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, individual democratic experiences differ greatly, and the extent to which the practices of democracy (broadly conceived) may be humbling will likely depend on the degree of influence one has. Those who have little power and influence will rarely (or never) find

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<sup>7</sup> This way of thinking about democracy calls into question the political relevance of Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital and the transformative potential of exposure to difference in social settings like bowling clubs. The social capital that may be developed in nonpolitical settings (such as bowling clubs) may be very different from the political capital (awareness, humility, and openness) that may be needed to constructively participate in making collective decisions in the context of diversity and disagreement.

themselves in situations where they have to constructively engage with others. For example, if our experiences with democracy start and stop with casting a secret vote, then we may never be forced to adjust our positions or perspectives in response to the concerns of others. Likewise, those who have a lot of influence in a democratic system may be powerful enough to ignore those they disagree with. If we are, for example, members of an entrenched majority (or the leader of one) we may be free to do what we want without accommodating those who are opposed to us. Nevertheless, in the middle of this spectrum — between minimal influence and dominance — lies a (relatively large) space where inclusive democratic processes should, normally, force us into confrontations with others who are both different from us (politically, socially, or culturally) *and* similarly empowered to influence collective decisions. Being exposed to others who have opposing or unfamiliar world views can be a humbling experience — it may force us to recognize (or admit) that we are only one person (or group) in the larger scheme of things, and that our political perspectives are not shared by everyone.<sup>8</sup> Indeed these are definitional components of modern conceptions of humility (see, e.g., Tangney 2002). But the relationship between humility and democracy goes one step further than this: it may be humbling to (willingly or unwillingly) become aware of differences, but it is, presumably, *even more* humbling to have to work with unfamiliar others to get things done together.

Importantly, the ways in which (empowered) participants are likely to respond to the challenges of collective decision making in the context of diversity, will likely depend on whether they have some degree of humility to being with. Those who have no capacity for humility may be more likely to respond to the challenges of democracy with frustration, self-justification, or disengagement. Those who are arrogant, self-absorbed, narcissistic, or overly confident in the correctness (or righteousness) of their own opinions may be more likely to

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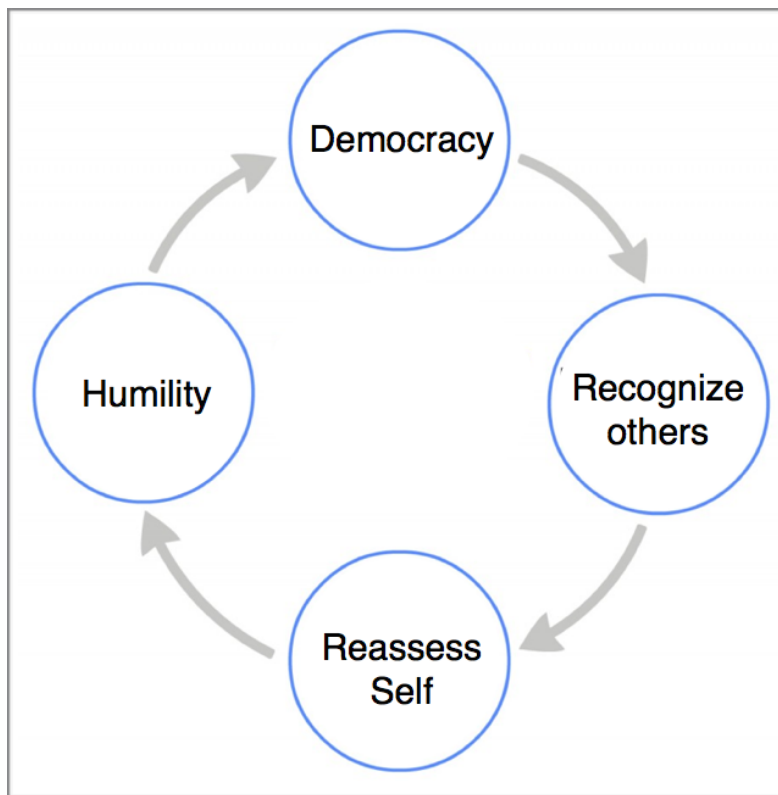
<sup>8</sup> It may be difficult to associate democracy with humility after the 2016 U.S. election, which was dominated by a man who is the embodiment of everything that humility is not. Indeed, political candidates are rarely humble, and perhaps humility does not pay as an electoral strategy. Nevertheless, those who failed to understand Trump's wider appeal have been quite literally humbled. They failed to treat Trump as a serious candidate, and they have been (bluntly) reminded that their assumptions about the political world (such as which issues matter and what a viable or desirable candidate looks like) are not shared by everyone. After the 2016 election, many voters (both Democrats and some Republicans) have been forced to recognize that their own view of the political world (and what is sensible or reasonable) is not shared by others. We might ultimately judge the views of others negatively — and we may continue to believe that their views are less sensible than ours, unreasonable, or unjustifiable — but democratic practices *even election campaigns* can often force us to recognize that other people hold genuine beliefs that we do not agree with, and that can be humbling in a very tangible way.



respond negatively when exposed to different points of view in the democratic arena. By contrast, those who have some inclination towards humility, may be more likely to respond to democratic exchanges (or confrontations) by reconsidering (or reassessing) their own perspectives and their own place within the political world in relation to others.

If this is the case, we can imagine a virtuous cycle (Figure 3). We need a little bit of humility to engage productively in democratic processes with others who may have very different social, political, and cultural perspectives or objectives (Button 2005). If we have some initial capacity for humility we may be more likely to respond to democratic exchanges (or confrontations) by reconsidering our own perspectives in relation to others. This, in turn, might force (or encourage) us to reassess ourselves and our own place in the political world. This capacity (or willingness) to reassess the self, is, of course, the first step toward developing additional (or more robust) capacities for humility.

**Figure 3:  
The Virtuous Cycle of Humility and Democracy**



The argument that democracy can help cultivate humility (were some initial inclinations toward humility exist) is a general claim, but it is clearly more likely to be relevant in some democratic contexts as opposed to others. In my view, this argument is particularly relevant to democratic processes that involve face-to-face deliberations — such as those that take place in small, randomly selected, deliberative forums or “mini-publics” (see, e.g., Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2014). Small deliberative forums are relevant in this context because they constitute a very immediate and intensive form of democratic engagement. The most effective mini-publics create spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds can engage in deliberations with others who are equally empowered to affect collective decisions within the forum. Importantly, participants are therefore compelled to frame their claims in ways that others might plausibly accept if they wish to have any influence within the group. And they must be open to the possibility that their ideas or perspectives may be (more or less effectively) challenged by others. Such experiences are likely to be humbling, especially for those who are not used to testing their claims against those who may have different opinions or opposing perspectives.

Deliberations also have an epistemic function. They can, at least ideally, expose participants to new information and other relevant perspectives on pertinent issues. When this happens participants may be encouraged to correct mistaken beliefs or update their existing beliefs with more nuanced positions (see, e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Young 2000). It is, of course, entirely possible that none of these things will happen in any single deliberative forum or at any specific moment in time — the point is that effective deliberations expose participants to imperatives that should push them to consider their own perspectives in relation to others, and these imperatives are stronger where interactions between people with different perspectives are most intensive and where participants are (approximately) equally empowered. Making accurate assessments of our own capacities, being open to new ideas or contradictory information, correcting mistaken beliefs, consciously placing ourselves in the context of others, and appreciating (or considering) what others (might) have to offer, are all definitional elements of modern conceptions of humility (Tangney 2002).

In this section, I have argued that democratic experiences can help cultivate humility if participants are willing to respond to others with some minimum level of openness. Although

democracy is not (and cannot) be our only source of humility, democracy has a particularly important role to play in societies that are informed by liberal principles of individualism. Democracy (broadly conceived) is a system of governance that (ideally) empowers individuals and is thus consistent with principles of individualism and autonomy. But it is also a form of governance that forces individuals and groups (who may be very different from each other) to work in concert to get things done. When we are forced into this position we have only two choices: 1) we can dig in our heels and refuse to work with others who have different perspectives or objectives from our own; or 2) we can recognize (however grudgingly) that our own concerns and perspectives are not (and cannot) always be made paramount. The act of placing ourselves in the context of others and recognizing their claims is, fundamentally, an act of humility.

### **Democracy and Intergenerational Humility**

If there is a connection between democracy and humility, it is nevertheless useful to ask whether democracy may be used to help cultivate intergenerational humility as well. I believe that there is a connection between democracy and intergenerational humility and I will make two arguments to help establish this connection.

The first argument is straightforward. It seems likely that individuals (and groups) must have a sense of their own place among contemporaries before they are likely to develop a better sense of their own place in time. In other words, it may be necessary to develop a sense of humility *in general* before one is likely to develop a sense of intergenerational humility. If this is the case, any means of cultivating humility (such as democracy) may be viewed as one (essential) step toward the development of intergenerational humility. Of course, there can be no guarantee that a general sense of humility will lead to intergenerational humility, but the two concepts are so closely related that it would be intellectually inconsistent to maintain a sense of humility towards one's contemporaries without also recognizing the value of other generations or their place in the grand scheme of things. On this account, *any* means of cultivating humility, in general, will also produce fertile soil for the cultivation of intergenerational humility.

The second argument makes the connection between democracy and intergenerational humility more explicit, but it is nevertheless built upon the first argument. I have argued in the previous section that democracy can help cultivate humility by exposing participants to the world views of others and forcing them to work with others to get things done. Importantly, if inclusive democratic processes expose us to the concerns and perspectives of others, they are also likely to expose us to others who might have very different temporal perspectives from our own. In general, public issues have both contemporary and temporal dimensions. If politics is about who gets what, when, and how — as Laswell (1936) suggested — we should consider not only how public costs and benefits are distributed among contemporaries but also how they may be distributed through time. When viewed in this way, nearly every political issue has a temporal dimension. Garbage collection is about making garbage invisible now, but it also (normally) involves creating landfills that future generations will have to manage. Public pension plans involve paying near-term costs for potential benefits that our future selves will (hopefully) enjoy (see, e.g., Jacobs 2011). By comparison, budget deficits make it possible to enjoy near-term benefits while transferring the costs of those benefits to the future.

On contentious political issues (such as whether budget deficits can be justified or climate change should be stopped) opposing political actors are likely to adopt different temporal perspectives for both strategic and principled reasons. When this is the case, democratic processes may expose participants to temporal considerations that they had not previously considered or would rather ignore.

It may, nevertheless, be possible to ignore the concerns of future generations (who cannot be included in our decision making processes), but it should be *more* difficult to ignore the concerns of the future in inclusive democratic arenas where many different types of political actors (with opposing concerns and different temporal perspectives) have to find ways to work with each other to get things done. Indeed, arguments that evoke the potential concerns of future generations often have a potent political currency; this is, in part, because future generations are widely recognized as apolitical (and thus politically unimplicated) subjects of moral concern. As such, it is often difficult to defend political positions that are explicitly self-serving at the expense of the future. And it is especially difficult to do so in deliberative environments where

bad arguments (or disingenuous claims) can be exposed as such. In short, once the concerns of the future have been articulated in a democratic (or deliberative) arena, it may be politically difficult to ignore them, especially when contentious issues are involved and when proponents (on one side or another) can make plausible claims that their actions will benefit the future more than their opponents. On this account, democracy helps expose participants to the concerns of both contemporary others and future others. In the best case scenario, democracy also forces participants to confront diversity and reconcile their own positions with the concerns of both contemporary and future others. As explained above, the act of placing oneself in the context of others and recognizing their claims is, fundamentally, an act of humility. If robust democratic (or deliberative) processes can help cultivate a sense of humility by exposing us to the claims of others, they can also help cultivate intergenerational humility when the temporal dimensions of political issues are recognized and made explicit.

## **Conclusion**

A number of scholars have argued that humility is an under appreciated political (or democratic) good (Button 2005; Griffin 2011; Rushing 2013; Scott 2014).<sup>9</sup> Following these scholars, I have argued that humility may be conceived of as a corrective virtue that helps reorient individuals (and groups) away from themselves and towards a recognition of their place in the context of others. On this account, humility may be thought of as a political good because it is associated with the sort of openness that is required for individuals and groups to navigate their differences and work with each other to get things done.

I have also argued that the way we think about the self (in relation to others) matters for how we think about the problems of intergenerational injustice, whether we see them as problems, and what we might be willing to do about them. If humility is a corrective virtue that can help us keep our own place among (contemporary) others in perspective, intergenerational humility is a corrective virtue that can help us keep our own place in time in perspective. Those who have a sense of intergenerational humility recognize that there are strong social, political,

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<sup>9</sup> Craiutu (2016) has made a defense of moderation as a political good and his arguments have considerable overlap with those that focus more narrowly on humility as a source of political moderation.

epistemic, and moral connections between generations. Our generations are those that happen to be living at this moment in time, but we cannot, on those grounds, claim to have any special status among the long chain of generations reaching both backwards and forwards in time. It is comparatively easy for those who are primarily focused on their own concerns to both devalue the contributions of the past and ignore or dismiss the potential concerns of the future. If we are primarily concerned only about ourselves we will have few reasons to think past our own limited time-horizons. By contrast, when we appreciate the smallness of our own place in time, and the debts we owe to the past, it becomes more difficult (and intellectually dishonest) to ignore the reciprocal responsibilities that we have to the future.

It is telling that so much of the literature on intergenerational justice is concerned with *why* and *whether* we ought care about the future (see, e.g., Laslett and Fishkin 1992; Sikora and Barry 1978). Why should we do anything for a future that we will not enjoy and that has, frankly, never done anything for us? As Rawls (1999) and other liberal theorists (e.g., Gosseries 2007; Mazor 2010) have found, this question is difficult to answer within the context of a purely liberal theory that abstracts individuals away from their social, political, cultural, and temporal contexts. In comparison, those who have a sense of intergenerational humility (and thus a sense of their own place in time) are more likely to ask: Why do we so often fail to think about the future? I have argued that our failure to think about the future has something to do with how we think about ourselves in relation to past, present, and future others.

If humility is a political good it is reasonable to ask whether it is obtainable. It is not adequate to simply say that humility is the sort of thing we ought to have more of, without saying how we might get more of it. Some psychologists have argued that humility may be antithetical to human nature. Most of us are focused primarily on our own concerns — except in those circumstances when someone else is dependent on us. We also tend to take credit for ourselves when the things go well, and we look to blame others when things go wrong. We are inclined to elevate the self above others because we must, after all, view the world through our own eyes. As such, it may be reasonable to expect true humility to be relatively rare among the general population (Tangney 2002, p. 416). Indeed, as Foot (1978) explains, humility would not be a corrective virtue if it were not difficult to obtain (p. 9).

Nevertheless, we should not be too pessimistic about the prospects for cultivating humility — even in societies that are informed by liberal principles of individualism. As June Tangney (2002), a leading scholar in the study of the positive psychology of humility, explains “people apparently can control the degree to which they self-enhance in response to situational demands” (p. 416). I have argued that democratic processes can create the sort of situational demands that are conducive to the cultivation of humility. Effective democratic processes literally help “put us in our place” by exposing us to others who have different perspectives and objectives, and by forcing us to work through those differences to get things done.

If effective democratic processes can help cultivate humility, in general, then they might also help cultivate intergenerational humility. Indeed, maintaining a humble (or accurate sense) of oneself in relation to (contemporary) others is so closely related, conceptually, to having a sense of one’s own place in time, that it is difficult to be (genuinely) humble without also maintaining a sense of intergenerational humility. If this is the case, any means of cultivating humility, generally, will also be a means of cultivating intergenerational humility.

But there is also a direct connection between democracy and intergenerational humility. If democracy can help cultivate humility by exposing us to the perspectives of others (and forcing us to reconcile our own world views with those others), democracy will also help attune us to the concerns of future others when the temporal dimensions of political issues are recognized and made explicit. I have argued that there are strategic advantages to framing one’s own position in ways that take into account the potential interests of the future when contentious political issues must be decided in democratic (or deliberative) arenas where actors are (approximately) equal and bad arguments or disingenuous claims can be challenged by others on those grounds.

The arguments that I make in this paper may be of interest for another reason as well. We tend to think of democracy as part of the cause of intergenerational injustice, and not part of the solution. Most individuals tend to care more about their immediate needs and less about the future. We also have cognitive biases against the future, and if democracies are designed to respond to our immediate — or expressed — concerns they are likely to favour the near-term over the long-term. Short electoral cycles can exacerbate these tendencies by creating incentives for elected officials to focus on near-term objectives even when they know that long-term issues

need to be addressed (e.g., Healy and Malhotra 2009; Ophuls 2011; Shearman and Smith 2007; Thompson 2010). But if I am right about the two arguments that I have made — that humility can help motivate us to care about the future, and that democracy can help cultivate humility — then these aspects of democracy may be viewed as a help rather than a hindrance to intergenerational justice.

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