

Redefining Intellectual Humility in Indian Context: An Experimental Investigation

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Abstract : Intellectual humility (IH) is defined as a virtuous mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual self-diffidence by the 'Doxastic Account of IH' studied, researched and developed by western scholars not earlier than 2015 at the University of Edinburgh. Ancient Indian philosophical texts or the Upanisads written in the Sanskrit language during the later Vedic period (circa 600-300 BCE) have long addressed the virtue of being humble in several stories and narratives. The current research paper questions and revisits these character traits in an Indian context following an experimental method. Based on the subjective reports of more than 400 Indian teenagers and adults, it argues that while a few traits of IH (such as trustworthiness, respectfulness, intelligence, politeness, etc.) are panhuman and pancultural, a few are not. Some attributes of IH (such as proper pride, open-mindedness, awareness of own strength, etc.) may be taken for arrogance by the Indian population, while other qualities of Intellectual Diffidence such as agreeableness, surrendering can be regarded as the characteristic of IH. The paper then gives the reasoning for this discrepancy that can be traced back to the ancient Indian (Upanisadic) teachings that are still prevalent in many Indian families and still anchor their views on IH. The name Upanisad itself means 'sitting down near' (to the Guru to gain the Supreme knowledge of the Self and the Universe and setting to rest ignorance) which is equivalent to the three traits among the BIG SEVEN characterized as IH by the western scholars viz. 'being a good listener', 'curious to learn', and 'respect to other's opinion'. The story of Satyakama Jabala (Chandogya Upanisad 4.4-8) who seeks the truth for several years even from the bull, the fire, the swan and waterfowl, suggests nothing but the 'need for cognition' or 'desire for knowledge'. Nachiketa (Katha Upanisad), a boy with a pure mind and heart, follows his father's words and offers himself to Yama (the God of Death) where after waiting for Yama for three days and nights, he seeks the knowledge of the mysteries of life and death. Although the main aim of these Upanisadic stories is to give the knowledge of life and death, the Supreme reality which can be identical with traits such as 'curious to learn', one cannot deny that they have a lot more to offer than mere information about true knowledge e.g., 'politeness', 'good listener', 'awareness of own limitations', etc. The possible future scope of this research includes (1) finding other socio-cultural factors that affect the ideas on IH such as age, gender, caste, type of education, highest qualification, place of residence and source of income, etc. which may be predominant in current Indian society despite our great teachings of the Upanisads, and (2) to devise different measures to impart IH in Indian children, teenagers, and younger adults for the harmonious future. The current experimental research can be considered as the first step towards these goals.

Keywords : ethics and virtue epistemology, Indian philosophy, intellectual humility, upanisadic texts in ancient India

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