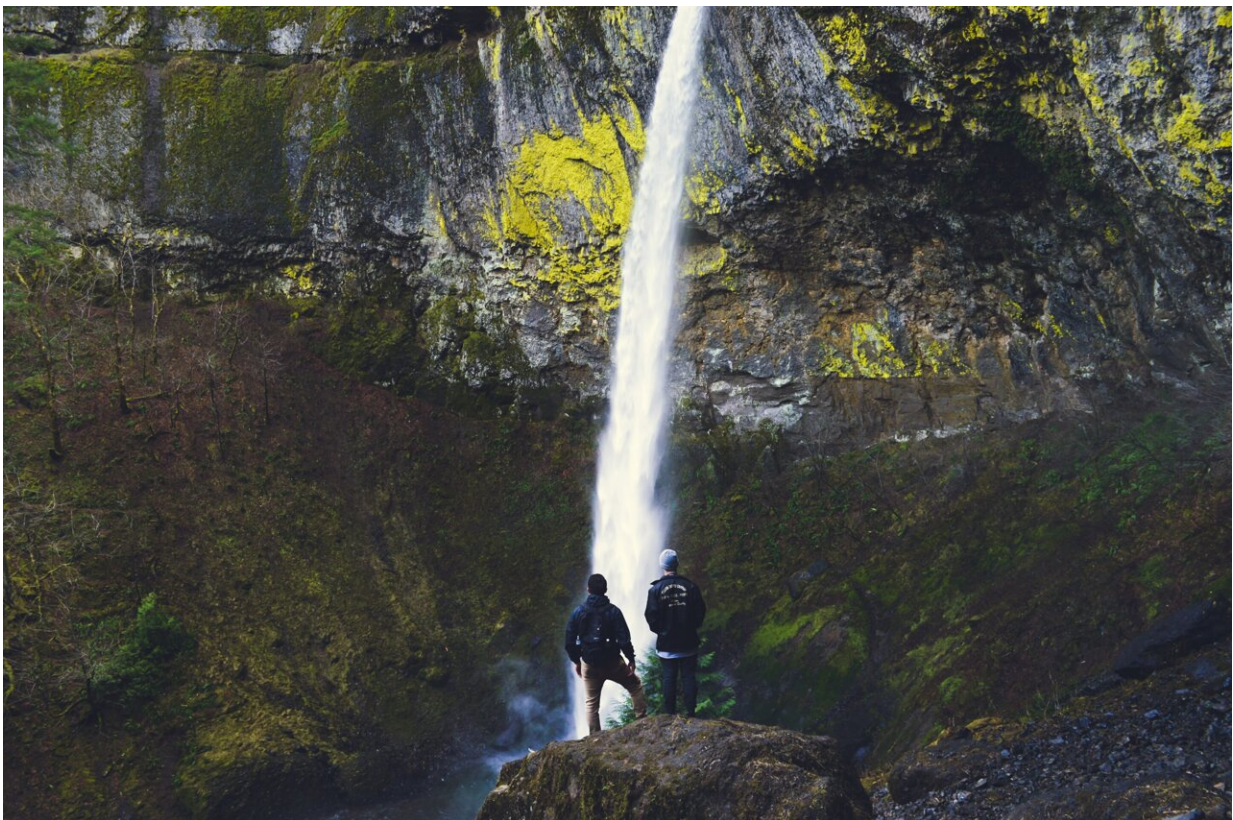


Researcher: Being humble is a good New Year's resolution, but it requires knowing what you value most

January 4 2024, by Darren Bradley



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

As the New Year gets going, many of us make resolutions to better our lives and our selves. Counselors and psychologists alike will tell you that

the key to self-improvement is being humble.

Author and coach Anna Katharina Schaffner has [described](#) humility as an "ancient virtue" that does not equate with [low self-esteem](#) but rather, "is a form of spiritual modesty." It is triggered, as she puts it, by understanding where we stand in the order of things.

Trying to actually define humility though, philosophically, is quite difficult. This difficulty is neatly encapsulated in the paradoxical nature of the statement: "I am humble." As the playwright and writer Alan Bennett [neatly put it](#): "All modesty is false modesty, otherwise it wouldn't be modesty."

My research [argues](#) that things aren't quite that clear cut. Both [self-doubt](#) and indifference to what other people think is central to being truly humble.

A self-doubt account of humility

The paradox stems from the sense that true humility is incompatible with a belief in one's own humility. Someone who is humble necessarily believes that they are not humble. The philosopher [Julia Driver](#) argues that humility requires an underestimation of one's own good qualities. We might call this an "ignorance account" of humility. It says that to be humble is to be ignorant of your good qualities.

But, humility, as Schaffner put it, is considered an intellectual virtue. So too is having true beliefs. Driver herself [agrees](#) that having true beliefs is central to intellectual virtue. But this is at odds with her idea that humility requires having false beliefs. It should be possible for someone to have—or at least, to strive towards having—both virtues: being humble and being honest about yourself.

The philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze'ev [argues](#) that that humility is compatible with having accurate beliefs about one's own qualities. Some people might have a falsely low opinion of their good qualities. We can call those people servile. Others might have a falsely high opinion of their own good qualities. Call those people prideful.

Humble people, by contrast, get the balance right, with an accurate opinion of their good qualities. So humility is good to the extent that it involves having accurate beliefs. Ben-Ze'ev's is an "accuracy account" of humility.

But humility need not involve having accurate beliefs about everything. The most accurate beliefs would involve being certain of what is true, but humility seems to require that we avoid certainty, as we should always allow the possibility that we are mistaken.

Indeed, I have argued that we should not be certain of even the most obvious truths, such as $1+1=2$. We should always allow for the possibility that our cognitive faculties have let us down.

This "self-doubt account" of humility allows you to truthfully say "I am humble," as long as you are open to the possibility that you might be wrong.

The typical aim of asserting "I am humble" conflicts with the literal meaning of the phrase. Such an assertion is usually intended to impress people, which isn't something someone who really is humble generally tries to do.

This brings out an important feature of humility that is still missing from the self-doubt account: that humility requires having the right kind of desires as well as the right kind of beliefs. Call this an "indifference [account](#)" of humility. It is, as the philosopher George Frederick Schueler

[puts it](#), about simply not caring whether others are impressed by you for your accomplishments or skills.

So as you set about achieving your goals for the year to come, dwell on this thought. True [humility](#), Schueler says, is about caring about what you set out to accomplish, not about being praised or getting credit for accomplishing it. To be humble, you need to examine what is really valuable: to know what it is that you value most.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Researcher: Being humble is a good New Year's resolution, but it requires knowing what you value most (2024, January 4) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-humble-good-year-resolution-requires.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.