

Humility



Send him mail.

"Food for Thought" is an original column appearing every other Tuesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Norman Imberman. Norman is a retired podiatrist who loves playing piano, writing music, lawn bowling, bridge, reading, classical music, going to movies, plays, concerts and traveling. He is not a member of any social network, nor does he plan on becoming one. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FFT-only RSS feed available [here](#).

Webster's dictionary defines *humble* as "not proud or arrogant; modest; low in rank in importance, position or quality; having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority or subservience." *Humility* is defined as "the quality or condition of being humble; modest sense of one's importance." In these definitions nothing is written about the morality of these characteristics. However, the "goodness" or "badness" of these words has been ingrained into our culture. Humility, modesty, having a low sense of one's importance, is supposed to be "good," while feeling good about oneself and one's sense of accomplishments is supposed to be "bad." I ask myself why is the opposite of humility necessarily arrogance. My answer is that the mores taught by the universally accepted philosophy of altruism dictates such judgments.

The first definition above implies that it is arrogant to feel proud of oneself or one's accomplishments. It also implies that arrogance is bad and humility is good. It has been my experience that when someone is being accused of being arrogant, the accuser is usually jealous of the "arrogant" one, or at least feels inferior to him. Judging him as arrogant gives the accuser a sense of superiority; however, it is false superiority. It is true that legitimate arrogance does exist when one makes "unwarrantable claims or pretensions to superior importance or rights," as defined by Webster's dictionary.

One should be proud of oneself or one's accomplishments. I constantly hear people when complimented for a job well done respond with a denial of their accomplishment. They usually say something like, "it wasn't that good," or "I wasn't very happy with the job." I see it happening no matter where I am and no matter what the context. To me, false humility is a character flaw and it gets my dander up. To make matters worse, when others hear the one who is complimented then deny that he performed well, they consider that denial a sign of great moral rectitude. For example: I'm a lawn bowler. Often, when an opponent plays particularly well, I'll compliment her or him on the excellence of the game.

Like a broken record she or he will deny it or make some excuse like, "I was just lucky today." Those within hearing distance consider such a response a trait of "such a nice person."

The opposite side of the same coin is the situation where others give compliments and support to others for a job poorly done. In this case it is a knee-jerk compliment that was instilled in them by their parents or clergymen. People know when they deserve praise and when they don't. They can detect the insincerity but just say nothing about it because they too were taught to be polite and accepting of other's good intentions. If I were to tell someone who complimented me for a job that I know was poorly done, that they were giving me false praise, they would deny it and would probably like me even better for telling them that it was false praise because they would take it as a show of my humility. We live in a world of good intentions. Results don't count. It's only the intention that matters, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

From the ethical edict "that it is better to give than to receive" comes the ridiculous notion that it is necessary to give compliments but it is in bad taste to accept them.

Of course there are people who brag about who they are and their accomplishments. These are cases of low self-esteem. There is a difference between feeling proud of one's self and bragging about it. The person of low self-esteem constantly needs to let others know about their accomplishments. The person with a healthy self-esteem accepts the compliment but does not make it a necessary condition of his well-being. When I know I performed well, a compliment by another is followed by me with a simple, "Thank you, I appreciate it."

People who constantly accuse others of being arrogant should look in the mirror and ask themselves what it is about the other person or his accomplishments that motivates them to make such an accusation. A few years ago I wrote an article and gave it to an acquaintance who asked to read it. His only response was that I was too judgmental and arrogant, not realizing that his comment would be hurtful, disappointing and frustrating to me and not realizing that his comment was just as judgmental and arrogant as he labeled my article. Nothing was said about the content of the article, which was what I expected since he asked to read it. I would have appreciated his criticism, telling me about what he liked and what he did not agree with and why he disagreed. Criticism would have been more welcomed than an attack upon my personality. In this particular case I surmise that even though he disagreed with my article, he did not have the intellectual capacity to rationally criticize my article, so he attacked me personally.

It's true that many people are justified in feeling humble since they do nothing about which they can feel proud. This is a case of legitimate humility but it is the flaw of false humility and false praise that we witness most of the time.