

Humility is a virtue. But can humble people be successful in the modern world?

The Scottish Enlightenment David Hume, a friend of Adam Smith, called humility one of the “monastic” virtues, and he did not mean it as a compliment. Humble people, he seemed to say, are not made for capitalism. Skip ahead if you don’t want to read the whole deliciously bitter passage from his “Inquiry into the Principles of Morality”:

celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole array of monastic virtues; why are they rejected everywhere by reasonable people, except because they serve no purpose? neither enhance a man’s fortune in the world, nor make him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of society, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? On the contrary, we observe that they exceed all of these desirable goals; deaden the mind and harden the heart, darken the imagination and sour the temper. We therefore rightly transfer them to the opposite column and place them in the catalog of vices; nor is there any superstition among the worldly people of sufficient power to totally corrupt these natural feelings. A gloomy, brainless enthusiast may have a place on the calendar after his death; but if he lives he will hardly ever be admitted to intimacy and company save by those as insane and somber as he is.

I kind of understand Hume’s argument. If progress in capitalism is fueled by people’s pursuit of self-interest, we won’t get very far if everyone’s into mortification, self-denial, and so on.

On the other hand, we are taught from childhood to be humble. Humility is a fundamental virtue in Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other religions. Tuesday evening through Wednesday evening is the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, which includes the prayer “Here am I poor in works.”

I did some reading and came to the conclusion that humility and capitalism are not necessarily at odds. They can actually go quite well together. Although it partly depends on what you mean by humility.

Humility is a difficult virtue to talk about. If you say you are not humble, you are probably telling the truth. On the other hand, if you say you *are* You probably aren’t humble, because people who are humble don’t go around bragging about it. Then there is the paradox that humility is good, but being humble is really bad. tricky, right?

[Source](#)

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