

*This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast ‘A personal tale of intellectual humility – and the rewards of being open-minded,’ published on February 29, 2024.*

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**Gemma Ware:** With unlimited information at our fingertips and dozens of platforms on which to share our opinions, it can sometimes feel like we’re supposed to be experts in everything. It’s exhausting. In this episode, we talk to a psychologist whose research and experiences in intellectual humility have taught him that acknowledging what we don’t know is as important as asserting what we do know. I’m Gemma Ware and you’re listening to The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts.

We’re joined at the start of this episode by Senior Science and Technology Editor at The Conversation in the US, Maggie Villiger. Welcome back to the podcast, Maggie.

**Maggie Villiger:** Thanks, Gemma.

**Gemma Ware:** So, the story we’re going to be talking about today is part of a series that you’ve been working on around a concept called intellectual humility, which I’ll have to admit being intellectually humble myself, that I hadn’t heard about before I came across this. So, why did you decide to do this series?

**Maggie Villiger:** I think we got interested in the idea of intellectual humility because of how little humility you see around us in contemporary life, at least here in the United States, where the political and cultural landscapes are so polarized at the moment. It feels like people are just entrenched in their own beliefs, unwilling or unable to hear anything that doesn’t fit in with their own current positions. Especially since the start of the pandemic, I’ve collaborated with researchers on a bunch of stories related to science denial and anti-vaccine attitudes and so on. And

it always felt so disheartening when they describe how resistant people are to changing their minds, even about things that, to me, feel so factually obvious.

But of course, I had to recognize the irony of my own position there, as I learned more about what it takes to really be intellectually humble. But luckily, The Conversation received a grant from the Greater Good Science Foundation at the University of California, Berkeley, and the John Templeton Foundation that allowed us to work on this collection of stories about intellectual humility.

**Gemma Ware:** Huh, and it's election year in the US, there are a lot of other countries around the world who are holding elections in 2024 as well. Why is intellectual humility such an important thing to think about at moments like this?

**Maggie Villiger:** I think it has to do with how divided people feel from one another. Our politicians, they just seem to spend time, you know, sniping at one another and we're really facing big problems that we need to work on together. And you know, if you can't even conceive of the possibility that what you currently know or believe could be wrong, then you can never learn anything new. And curiosity and open-mindedness have a lot to do with intellectual humility, and I think these are all important parts of coming up with solutions for the challenges that we face and putting them into practice, whether that's on a grand societal scale, or even just being able to connect with a family member who doesn't share a single viewpoint with you.

**Gemma Ware:** And is intellectual humility a big area of academic research?

**Maggie Villiger:** Yes, even bigger than I maybe had anticipated. For our stories, we worked with philosophers and political scientists, who are really interested in big questions around truth and virtues and how people can connect across these divides. We collaborated with one psychology researcher who's investigating how intellectual humility works in the classroom, and with organizational behavior scholars who are researching how it can change difficult interactions at work.

One of my favorite stories was written by Daryl Van Tongeren, who's a professor of psychology at Hope College in Michigan, here in the US. He's so good at

explaining what intellectual humility is and isn't, and what it can and cannot do, but I think it's his personal background that really helps bring this topic out of the academic realm and into real life.

**Gemma Ware:** Well, thanks, Maggie. At your suggestion, we reached out to Daryl to find out about how his interest in intellectual humility all began.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** In graduate school, I had the fortunate opportunity to study under Everett Worthington, who's an international expert on forgiveness. And in our research, what we were finding was that, when we were trying to figure out who asks for forgiveness, who's more likely to give forgiveness, and what makes for a good apology, everything kind of converged on this idea of humility. So, someone humbly asking for forgiveness, you know, admitting when they're wrong, these are the things that kind of contribute to a healthy relationship and can help prepare and sustain relationships. So then, we started thinking more about, are there different expressions of humility, and one of those expressions might be intellectual humility. So acknowledging that you might be wrong, acknowledging your strengths and weaknesses, and being willing to revise your beliefs. And now, all of this was very academic to me.

**Gemma Ware:** That changed for Daryl one day when his brother passed away suddenly and unexpectedly, leaving behind three children under the age of six.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** Now, I was raised in kind of a conservative religious upbringing where I was taught, you know, many things about God's goodness, God's power, God's omniscience, love. And the experience of losing my brother stood in stark contrast to what I was taught. And all of a sudden, I found myself having to try to make sense of what seemed like this senseless suffering. And so it really plunged me into this period of questioning everything, you know, questioning some of the deep beliefs that I had held and been taught since I was very, very young.

**Gemma Ware:** For Daryl, this process of questioning everything started with therapy.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** With this huge loss and a deep sense of grief, my therapist was, kind of, this ready person that I could process my feelings. But also, I think a lot of it was me trying to make sense of what happened through reading. I probably became pretty annoying, everyone that was my friend or hung out with me for a certain period of time, I'd be like, "Let me make you a strong cocktail, and let's work through some of life's deeper existential questions." And so, it was probably also a couple of years of me just bouncing these different ideas off of other people who'd be willing to put up with a little bit of existential wrestling.

**Gemma Ware:** These deep, personal, and existential questions that Daryl was asking himself, and everyone around him, weren't particularly linked to his own academic research.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** I can't say that at the time there was this conscious process of, "Oh, I'm studying intellectual humility, and wouldn't it be great to practice this virtue at a time when my life is falling apart?" It kind of seemed like the only possible and reasonable choice at the moment, in order to try to find some semblance of meaning in the midst of some pretty great despair.

**Gemma Ware:** And where, if you don't mind me asking, have you ended up at the end of that journey? Are you still someone who calls yourself a religious person? Yeah, where has your intellectual humility led you, in terms of your faith?

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** Yeah, so I think there's two places that I landed. The first thing that this process taught me is that I, kind of, let go of this illusion of having to have to make sense of everything. I started to become more comfortable with saying I just don't know, right? I became more comfortable with believing that things could just be senseless. Things could not make sense. It's likely that I'm not going to ever be able to explain not only this but a whole host of other things.

And so, by letting go of this need for certainty, need for closure, need to explain things, it actually started opening me back up to a sense of wonder and awe and curiosity that felt more freeing than perhaps I'd ever felt before in this type of domain. Especially being a professor. I'm literally paid to profess, right? Students

tell me, “Tell me what you think and you have to be right. You’re the expert.” But this was a place in my life where I could say, “Yeah, I just really don’t know.”

And then in terms of where I landed, you know, I teach a psychology of religion course, and I’m very vague whenever I teach this course because I really want my students to go through this process, questioning all their beliefs. So when they leave this class, they have ownership over their beliefs. And I’ll tell you the same thing I tell them, I would consider myself religious but it’s probably in a very different way than many people consider themselves to be religious. And while it still has some residual vestige of my original religious upbringing, I would say in many ways, it looks quite different, and it’s largely because of this experience.

**Gemma Ware:** Now years later, Daryl continues to do research on intellectual humility.

So I’ll ask you if you could define this concept for us. What actually is intellectual humility in the way that it’s known in academia?

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** So within us, it’s our ability to admit and own our cognitive limitations. And that includes knowing our strengths and our weaknesses, the things that we know, but also the things that we don’t know, and also knowing when we don’t know something, and being able to admit that and be okay with that. That means saying, “Oh, I’m wrong,” or “Yeah, I’m not quite sure.”

Interpersonally, it means being able to present my ideas or interact with someone in a way that’s non-defensive and is really marked by a willingness to be open-minded enough that I’m gonna revise my beliefs, in alignment with sufficiently strong evidence.

**Gemma Ware:** The need for sufficiently strong evidence is key here.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** So it’s not wishy-washiness. It doesn’t mean that you can’t have any conviction whatsoever. It means you believe something until you realize that there’s something better to believe in, and then you would change your mind, in accordance to that.

**Gemma Ware:** And you've described it as being the right size in any given situation, which I really like. So this is the idea of being not too big, not too arrogant, but also not too small, not being too, kind of, shy to express your opinion.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** We psychologists kind of talk about the Aristotelian Golden Mean, right? So for Aristotle, there is a vice on excess or on deficit. So most of us think initially about humility as making sure that we're avoiding the ditch of arrogance. And that's an important ditch to avoid because, you know, we don't want to over-claim knowledge or say that we know things that we don't or come into a situation when we're meeting new people and assume, "Oh, I'm clearly the expert. They have a lot to learn from me."

But on the other side, we want to avoid the ditch of being too small. And we usually see that this burden falls unnecessarily on people who have traditionally been in lower positions of power or have been marginalized. And so the reason why I really like the right sizing is because for people who just hear humility and they think, "Well, gosh, all the time I feel like I'm making sure that I'm not too big." For some folks and in some situations, it actually means stepping into the power or the expertise that you have earned, right?

If I'm meeting with my neurosurgeon, let's say, I have to have a critical operation, you know, she comes in, I don't want her saying like, "Hey, Daryl, what do you think we should do in this situation?" You know, like, "Tell me what procedure we should use. How long should you be under anesthesia?" You know, I have no idea. That, you know, she's the expert. That's being too small, right? But you tell me, you step into that expertise that you've earned and I'll listen. So it's not too big, but also not too small.

**Gemma Ware:** Intellectual humility can actually be quite tricky to study. Researchers can't just ask someone if they're intellectually humble. If they say yes, are they? So psychologists have to devise more roundabout ways to study it.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** Some are more clever than others. They'll give participants a list of different facts, right? And some of these are true facts and some of them

are not true. But we'll ask them, you know, "How many of you have heard of these things before?" And people who are low in intellectual humility, they'll over-claim knowledge. So they're like, "Oh, I definitely heard of that." And it's just not really a real thing at all.

We can also observe people's behaviors. So there have been times, where my colleagues and I, will assess somebody's attitude towards a particular issue. And then we also have them rate how willing they would be to change their mind or how open they are to feedback. They have a discussion and then with someone who thinks differently than they do, and then later we can measure their attitude again to see has their attitude shifted at all, right? Have they softened their attitude?

Because usually what happens is when two people who disagree get together and have a conversation about a topic, especially a charged topic, what happens is people become more extreme, more entrenched in their original leanings. And so, usually, we're just waiting for the other person to stop talking long enough for us to defend our point. We're not even listening to them. We're just trying to think about how ridiculous their argument is and how wrong they are.

But when folks can cultivate an intellectual humility, where there's curiosity, where there's a desire to learn, it's more likely that people kind of move more toward hearing the other person, maybe more open to change their minds.

**Gemma Ware:** Mm Hmm. What do you know now about what the benefits of being intellectually humble are? Why is it important?

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** You know, from a broad perspective, I think any type of technological or societal change that's ever happened in a culture, has always come from intellectual humility, somebody saying, "I don't know, but I'd like to learn."

But if we kind of zoom in a little bit more on the individual person, we know that relationships are much better when people are intellectually humble. We'd much rather be a partner with somebody humble than an arrogant or smug jerk, right? We'd much rather work for a boss who is willing to listen to our ideas, who asks

for ideas. And we find that humble leaders are more likely to have more creative teams. Teams that are more productive, that are healthier, that listen more.

And there's also some evidence that suggests that humility can breed humility. So it's contagious. And so there are benefits to the individual, to the relationship, and then to our society at home. So I think this is something that our society desperately needs.

**Gemma Ware:** And yet, when I asked Daryl for an example of an intellectually humble public figure, he struggled to name one.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** We live in a moment now, where even when people make mistakes and they say, "Oh, I'm sorry, and now I've changed," that isn't good enough. We demand perfection, not only perfection now, but also perfection in one's past and perfection in one's future. And to me, that is an unassailably tall order, like I'm not sure who can live up to that level of expectation. So it's a little harder for me to think of a public figure, right now, who's really modeling intellectual humility. And that's, to me, that's quite sad.

**Gemma Ware:** He attributed this to our desire for certainty.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** I think we're in a time when what people want is they want the security, they want the knowledge, they want the certainty of a leader who's always thought one way all the time.

**Gemma Ware:** Intellectual humility contributes to our psychological health and harmony, in the relationships that we have with those around us. But some of Daryl's research suggests that it can at times be detrimental to mental health.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** Some students and I did a set of projects, where what we were looking at was intellectual humility around these existential issues. You know, I was trying to figure out, like, can we be too humble around these big questions, where there's just really so much at stake?

**Gemma Ware:** Like what?



**Daryl Van Tongeren:** So thinking about what happens to you after you die, right? So that's something you don't want to be wrong about. So if you're like, "Eh, nothing happens to me," but actually something does and you're wrong about that, well, the stakes are kind of high. Or if you do think something happens to you after you die and you're like "Oh, it'll be great, you know, I'll catch up in the afterlife," and there's nothing, again the stakes are really high. So what we found is that intellectual humility around these existential issues like what are your beliefs about the afterlife, can actually undermine our own wellbeing. So when we're open to revise and we're saying "Yeah, I really don't know. I could be wrong." We live with the psychological cost of holding those beliefs so tentatively that they don't provide us with a sense of security. Four different studies found that people are more anxious about death and they have lower religious and spiritual well-being. And so, there might be this existential distress tolerance that we have to develop if we're going to be intellectually humble about some of these really big ideas.

**Gemma Ware:** So, just so I dig down into that a moment, it's not, say, somebody who just doesn't believe in an afterlife, will have less well-being versus somebody who absolutely does. It's the people in the middle who just don't know, and they're worried about it, that it might affect their psychological well-being.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** Or people who say, like, "I have a set of beliefs, but I'm really open to revising them." Those are the people who have the lower well-being. So, it's the ones that hold them more tentatively, which is why we think there's such a strong appeal to these certain, security-providing religious beliefs that say like this is the complete way of doing something, we're absolutely certain about it. That provides a lot of psychological benefits, but the downside is it makes people pretty intolerant and hostile towards people with whom they don't agree.

**Gemma Ware:** Still, Daryl insists that, in general, the benefits of intellectual humility far outweigh any drawbacks.

So Daryl, if anyone out there is listening and says, "Oh, you know what? I actually want to become a bit more intellectually humble." What could they do? What tips could you give them to start thinking about it?

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** I think the first thing to realize is that the moving sidewalk toward arrogance is always pulling us toward arrogance, right? So, every morning, you got to wake up, you got to walk the opposite way on the moving sidewalk. So, it's going to take constant work. Where you can start is, you can seek feedback, right? We're pretty biased reporters ourselves. We don't think that we're as biased as other people. We realize we might have some limitations. And even, you know, you all might be listening right now and be like, "Wow, intellectual humility is really great for my father-in-law, but it's not necessarily something I need. I need it a little. He needs it a lot."

So, we should ask a trusted source, you know, "How humble am I?" But then you need to brace yourself for the answer, because I've done this before and my wife gave me an answer I didn't like. And let's just say I didn't respond well, it only confirmed to her that I needed more humility. So seek feedback from a trusted source, someone who's going to tell you accurately. But the second thing that you can do is, you know, in the moment, our defensive response is going to be our default response. And so when tensions are high, when you feel yourself getting defensive, just pause and ask yourself, "How might I be wrong, and how might the other person be right?"

**Gemma Ware:** Another thing to try is changing the way you consume information.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** So when I was writing my book *Humble*, back in 2022, I was writing this advice, you know, in the book, like, "you need to diversify your news content." And I realized that I had the exact same routine every morning. I get my cup of coffee, I would read my new source, then I'd start writing the book. But what I realized was, I was not following my own advice. So then I started reading a wider variety of new sources. But again, it was just to see what the other side was doing and how ridiculous they were. So then I had to go a third step and say, well, what can I learn here? What am I not seeing? So signing up for, you know, there are emails where they'll give you two sides of one issue, and you can consider both parts.

Probably, one of the most valuable things we can do is just invest in a more diverse social network. Become friends with people with whom you differ. And don't try to convince them that they're wrong and you're right. Just listen to them. Just be their friend. And the more you're around people and you realize they're just like you, I think some of those walls will start coming down and you might start developing, even ever so slightly, some more intellectual humility. It's hard work, but I desperately think it's something that our entire society needs now, is just a little bit of acknowledgment that we don't know everything and we have a lot to learn.

**Gemma Ware:** Thank you, Daryl. We really appreciate you coming on the show and telling us about your research and your personal experiences too.

**Daryl Van Tongeren:** Thanks so much for having me.

**Gemma Ware:** That's it for this week's episode. Thanks to Daryl Van Tongeren for speaking with us about his work, and to our colleague, Maggie Villiger, who worked with him on the original story for The Conversation. We'll pop a link to that story in our show notes, and also a link to more articles from The Conversation's recent intellectual humility series. That series was produced with support from the University of California, Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, and The John Templeton Foundation, as part of the Greater Good Science Center's initiative on expanding awareness of the science of intellectual humility.

This episode was written and produced by Katie Flood, with production assistance from Mend Mariwany. I'm Gemma Ware, the show's executive producer. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor. Alice Mason runs our social media, and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts.

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