Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Intellectual Humility with Tenelle Porter

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Andy Luttrell:
There's a fun website out there: IUsedToBelieve.com. It's a place where people submit the weird things they used to believe when they were kids. Here are a few that they list as especially common false childhood beliefs…

I used to think all music on the radio was performed live by the band in the studio. I used to believe that trees were what make the wind blow. I used to think the dangers of drinking and driving applied to all drinks…like water and juice.

I used to believe that Anon was a real person's name. I actually believed this too. In middle school, I was really into websites with inspirational quotes and eventually I was like, "Who is this Anon guy? He has a lot of smart things to say."

I used to believe that getting fired meant being set on fire. I used to believe that if you swallow a seed, a plant will grow inside you.

And on and on. They're all silly, obviously, but they're actual beliefs that eventually we grow out of as we learn more about the world. But that can be true of any belief—not just the silly ideas we jump on as kids. When I was in college, I remember there was this popular NPR series-turned-book called This I Believe, and it was a set of essays about important people's core beliefs. And at the time, I was a huge fan of the radio show This American Life, and they ran an episode called This I Used to Believe, a play on the popular book about people who let go of core beliefs and what happened. And I don't know what it was, just the concept of that program has always had an impact on me. Like, we can believe things and feel like they're the right way to live our lives—we'll even write an essay about that belief for a bestselling book…but we can also abandon our beliefs. We can be wrong. And that's a good thing to keep in mind.

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And today I'm excited to share my conversation with Tenelle Porter. Tenelle is actually a new colleague of mine at Ball State University, where I work—she's an assistant professor of educational psychology. We met a few months ago, and she was just a fun person to talk ideas with, so I thought she'd be great for podcast. One of the things she studies is intellectual humility. We'll talk plenty about what that actually means, but essentially it's the

awareness that the things you believe might be wrong…like how maybe swallowing seeds doesn't actually mean a plant will grow in your stomach, but also bigger things like maybe my worldview, my opinions, my values, my belief in some conspiracy theory—maybe those are wrong too, and I don't actually have all the answers.

This is a super fun one. It's another in a string of in-person recordings I've been able to do lately, so the vibe is a little more conversational, and we take some twists and turns just exploring ideas and what they mean. So don't let me stop you…let's jump into my conversation with Tenelle Porter.

Andy Luttrell:
So, I figured the obvious place to start is also maybe something that throws us on shaky ground from minute zero, which is just the question of what is intellectual humility. So, if you were to just offer a general definition and then throw the necessary caveats on top of it, how do you define this thing?

Tenelle Porter:
Intellectual humility is recognizing the limitations of what you know and appreciating other people's intellect. Now, if you asked five researchers to define intellectual humility, you will get 20 different answers, so there's a lot of debate about how best to define it, but Mark Leary's kind of catch phrase is to say intellectual humility is recognizing that your beliefs might be wrong. I like to think of intellectual humility as recognizing that what you know about the world is partial, that you only see one piece of an entire reality, and therefore you're gonna get things wrong sometimes, and there are going to be lots of blind spots that you have, or places where your knowledge is incomplete.

Andy Luttrell:
Would you say that that is agreed upon? Or would you say for you, that's sort of how you've arrived at like, "For me, this feels right to call it this." Or is that consensus?

Tenelle Porter:
The most agreed upon part of intellectual humility is the piece about recognizing that our intellect, intelligence, knowledge is incomplete and is fallible. People begin to disagree when you talk about whether to be intellectually humble you need to respect other people's ideas. Some people say no, intellectual humility is only about how you think about your own knowledge. People disagree about whether intellectual humility should include behavioral parts, so can you be intellectually humble if you know that you might be wrong, or know that you don't know something, but then hide that from the rest of the world and never admit it publicly or never show it in your behavior?

Philosophers who study virtues would say absolutely not. The virtue needs to come with a host of components, including what's going on in your head, and also what your actions are, and also why you're doing what you're doing, your motivations. But psychologists, you know, don't always like to include… The concepts can get messy if we include lots of things in them. In our recent systematic review of all of the definitions and measures of intellectual humility, what really came through as the core was this cognitive part about knowing your knowledge is incomplete and recognizing that your beliefs are therefore fallible.

Andy Luttrell:
So, in looking at the tables in this review, it's just so striking the variety of ways in which people have come to this. And what was also weird to me is that it's not like, "Oh, over the last 60 years there's been a slow evolution in how we think of this, and so we've added and subtracted from our definitions over time." It's really like in the last five to seven years there's just this explosion and a bunch of people simultaneously coming up with different ways of thinking about what intellectual humility is. So, why did that happen? What is it about intellectual humility that makes it so rife for being interpreted in so many different ways, by so many different people, in a short span of time?

Tenelle Porter:
Yes. Why did that happen? Yes, you're right. The empirical research on intellectual humility, I don't think there's any before 2012. I mean, so somebody is gonna call into your podcast and tell me that that's not right, and I'm ready for that.

Andy Luttrell:
The phones are lighting up.

Tenelle Porter:
I am ready for that. But the empirical research is very new and part of the reason maybe that there have been so many different conceptualizations is that there's been a push towards interdisciplinary collaboration, and so philosophers have been working on concepts of virtue, and intellectual virtues in particular, for a bit longer than empirical researchers, psychologists, so as different psychologists teamed up with different teams of philosophers, I think that that made for some really interesting dynamics that led us down this path of coming up with lots of different ideas about what this could be.

But another just maybe less interesting, but like totally accurate explanation is that there have been a lot of big funding competitions around this construct of intellectual humility, so people have been applying at the same time to study intellectual humility, particularly through grants from the John Templeton Foundation, as they're very interested in this concept, and so lots of things were being funded at the same time when there really wasn't much of a empirical research base to start from. So, everybody's been working on these foundational questions simultaneously.

And I think just after this decade of doing that, we're at a point where we can kind of look back, so you'll see I have those couple of reviews out there that is taking stock of, "Okay, where are we now?" And yeah… Anyway, maybe I'll stop there. I was gonna twist off in some other different direction, but-

Andy Luttrell:
Oh, I'm curious. I mean, the thing that worries me is that that happens and then you're stuck with this mess, right? And you go… You've done the legwork, but if people just ignore it, they can very easily cite their past work and say, "Hey, this is how we've defined it before." And you get these things branching off in evermore distinct directions. And so, what's the hope for the future that we can actually get back to some core sense of what this means?

Tenelle Porter:
Yeah. Well, I'm not sure that the branching is a big problem, because to me, as long as people are being very clear about how they're defining and measuring intellectual humility, I think that will inform how we are synthesizing results from this larger, broader literature, and I do think that in a… I think that the construct is rightfully potentially conceptualized in a really rich, and nuanced, and multifaceted way, and so I'm a little bit reluctant to close the door on anything but this one conceptualization. I think it could potentially stifle progress.

So, if we think about it as multifaceted, and there are these different parts that we want to understand, I think that's still interesting. Think about empathy. You can think about a feeling of empathy. You can think about empathic behavior. And each of those is really interesting to understand in its own right, so if I think about the future of intellectual humility, maybe these branches are each kind of studying one really interesting part of intellectual humility, and as a result, because we haven't just said, "No, it has to be this and this thing alone," we're getting this fuller picture of what it can do in society, of just how its nature, how it works. And anyway, but I'm curious about your thoughts on that, the branching, and the problems of nobody can agree about what it is, and that's a big problem. What are your concerns about it?

Andy Luttrell:
So, your point is very well taken, which is that if you were to try to just say on day one, "Hey, everyone. This is what it is." You'd accidentally ignore all the different kinds of ways in which this thing could play out in the world. So, I totally get that. The concern is that if everyone's calling their version the same thing, there's just this confusion where we sort of paint this picture of we understand everyone's calling it one word, two words, and that gives the illusion that all of these studies are about the same thing, and it takes someone to unpack it and go, "Wait a minute. Those studies really were focused on this. These ones were focused on this." And so, sure, it's multifaceted, but if no one of those studies is acknowledging that they're looking at one of several facets, then that paints maybe a misleading picture of something that might be communicated as more unidimensional than it actually is.

Tenelle Porter:
A fair point. Is the solution to just put it in the title? In the abstract? Like, "Expressed Intellectual Humility," or, "Cognitive Intellectual Humility." The language gets a little bit cumbersome if you're having to use the term throughout an entire manuscript, but maybe signaling in a title in an abstract exactly what it's looking at could help. What do you think about that as somebody looking into this field? Still not great.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, the trouble too is that it's not as clean as maybe I made it sound, which is that, "Oh, there's version A, version B, and version C." And people are only ever looking at one of those three versions. Looking at the table where you sort of say, "Here are the specific components that each of these different paper…" No one is only doing one at a time, but they're doing different combinations of things, and maybe conveying it as, "Oh, we measured intellectual humility." And so, it could help if it were a little more clear, but it almost just takes like a, "Okay, we've made it this far. Let's all rally around. Here are the, whatever, six dimensions of intellectual humility."

And now we have a language for talking about which components are carrying which of these effects.

Because it's possible that you go, "Well, intellectual humility is associated with A, B, and C," but actually it's a different piece of intellectual humility that predicted A, than predicted B, than predicted C. And we again are now conflating three outcomes that are actually driven by quite different things.

Tenelle Porter:
That's exactly right. And so, I think if I do have a beef with the existing measures and conceptualizations, it's that many of them are meshing together a whole lot of different components and then don't have a great way of describing what those components are. You're seeing items in scales that are assessing how people feel about things, how people act in certain situations, what they think about their own beliefs and other people's beliefs, and it just becomes this kind of jumble of stuff in one long questionnaire, and I am guilty of this too, creating a measure that isn't necessarily super clean. And so, I think what I would hope is that we could be a little more precise in our measurement and measure one piece at a time, so that we can get those correlations between this facet of intellectual humility and whatever we're interested in studying versus that feature, to understand what's driving this, and also how do the components relate to one another.

Because it's very interesting to think about who's the person who recognizes that they might be wrong but never shows that to the world or shows kind of overconfidence to the world, or kind of shrinks back during conflicts or whatever, during disagreements. Those are really interesting questions to me and that feels like stuff that should be worked out.

Andy Luttrell:
Especially when, if we're selling this idea out in the world, the public world, and we go, "Be more intellectually humble in order to accomplish these societal wonders." That again is misleading if I go, "Well, actually, it turns out that there's actually one way you can be intellectually humble that does that, and if you've done the other three versions of intellectual humility, great job. Thanks for trying. But those aren't the things that actually had to happen for us to accomplish this outcome."

Tenelle Porter:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
So, from a public engagement standpoint, which I'm always kind of coming back to, that also seems potentially problematic. Because I do think the question of tolerance, and disagreement, and conflict, those are such important and pressing questions that it's really… I mean, we're jonesing for it, some solution, but if that solution is sort of too quickly supplied as a very generic thing, that actually misses the mark of the underlying piece that has to be there, then maybe that's a problem too.

Tenelle Porter:
Agreed.

Andy Luttrell:
But I don't think we're gonna solve this dilemma today.

Tenelle Porter:
I think that's probably true. Yeah. Yeah. I think that's probably true.

Andy Luttrell:
But if we take that at least there does seem to be like some core-

Tenelle Porter:
Yes.

Andy Luttrell:
I don't think we're trying to say as strongly that there are six fundamentally unrelated and independent things, but there is some core it seems, like you defined it as just kind of knowing the limits of your knowledge, and intellect, and knowing that you are fallible in the way that you think about things.

Tenelle Porter:
That's right.

Andy Luttrell:
Why is that good? Is it good? So, I believe that this is a thing that people can think. What are the implications of approaching the world in that way?

Tenelle Porter:
Great question. How many ways to answer this question?

Andy Luttrell:
There are a lot, so let me… I'll push the train down one track, which is maybe what kind of captures my attention most, like I was just talking about with disagreement, and so if we live in a world, which we do, where people have different opinions about things, and we grapple with what it means to differ in our opinion from someone else, what is it that intellectual humility might bring to the table in that kind of situation?

Tenelle Porter:
What we see in the research is that when you are able to recognize that you might be wrong, you become a little bit more open to listening to views that don't currently align with your own, and therefore you open yourself up to learning something new. You know, the fact of the matter is that we are humans, and as human beings we are fallible. That's just the fly in the ointment of being a human being. We are. We're fallible creatures. We step into mistakes. And so, there become kind of two options in light of that fallibility. One is just pretend it doesn't exist and plow through my life thinking like, "No, no, no. I've got it. Everything's great." And the other is actually reckoning

with the reality and acknowledging the truth, and that's what intellectual humility is. It's saying, "Yeah, I am fallible. Okay, so how do I live my life in light of the fact that I am fallible?" And I think that basically if I could boil down the essence of the benefit of intellectual humility across… You want disagreements, across a lot of different contexts, it's that intellectual humility makes it possible to grow. And without it, you can become stuck where you are. You are not willing to acknowledge that sometimes you… If you're not willing to acknowledge that you might be wrong, there would be no reason for you, perhaps, to hear out opinions that differ from your own.

I'm not sure if that's true, but I think so maybe, and yeah. Anyway, thoughts on that?

Andy Luttrell:
Well, the fact that it is a reality that we're fallible raises a question that I had which is I kind of… and this maybe reveals my personal intellectual humility, which is that I have such trouble understanding a less intellectually humble worldview. So, do we know anything about what it means to look out at the world and say, "Yes, I have it figured out. Nobody knows anything that I need to know. I have everything that I have." Is that plausible? Are there… I mean, it's sort of a weird question. Are there people who think this? Clearly, there are.

Tenelle Porter:
Yeah. Can we think of somebody who kind of thinks in this way? I am never wrong. I can never lose. I always win. Everything I say is correct. What I believe is always correct. What I think is always correct. And the world needs to bend to my ideas of reality and my supposed knowledge. I mean, I think that we do, we can think of maybe some people, maybe some leaders in our lives-

Andy Luttrell:
Sure, sure.

Tenelle Porter:
… who are that way, and-

Andy Luttrell:
In cases like that… I mean, I know exactly what you're talking about, but I still just have this little pang of like, "They don't really think that, though. They obviously understand that they don't have it all figured out."

Tenelle Porter:
I do wonder about that. Is it real? Like, is it real? Is everybody intellectually humble?

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. Right. It just seems like isn't that the constraint of reality, is that I have to understand that I'm only one person with one set of eyes and one brain? But I mean clearly that's not… That can't be the case based on the fact that we see variance and all this… I mean, there has to be variance in it. But I just… It's one of those things. It's kind of like a cultural thing where I go, "I cannot actually put myself in that other mindset," in the way that I can with other sorts of personalities. I go, "Oh, I may be a little bit more introverted, but I think I understand what it means to be extroverted." And I see people have fun out in the world socially and I go, "Yeah, you're having

fun," in a situation where… I don't know. I don't think I'd have fun, but I get that this is a fun experience. But yeah, this is the part that I have some trouble with, so let me twist it a little bit, which is it's a metacognition, which is also the kind of thing you can't always do, right? So, metacognitions require cognitions, right? We have to first be thinking and then be thinking about our thinking.

And so, it's a kind of a complicated sort of thing. And part of me earlier today as I was thinking about this stuff was wondering, is maybe what this is capturing is sort of a commitment to overriding the defaults, where we go, "Everybody has these confirmation biases and these heuristics," and when I'm tired, when I have to make quick decisions, I operate as though I have all the information and I'm right. But intellectual humility is really tracking my willingness to put on my metacognition hat and say, "Hold on. Pump the brakes." And so, it's less that if you really probed, people generally might say like, "Oh yeah. No, obviously I don't know everything." But really what this is is do I value the process of questioning those assumptions and not my belief in my infallibility.

I don't know. Does that make any sense?

Tenelle Porter:
It does make sense, especially the point on is this just so obvious, everybody must have this? Of course. No one's going to think that they know… no one's going to admit that they think they know everything. I think that people do, though, begin to forget about the great expanse of their ignorance. And this is Dave Dunning's work and others, that when we get them into certain contexts, contexts where they have a degree of expertise, or where they have really strong feelings, things become a little bit different. You see people thinking a little bit differently and all of a sudden this kind of, "Well, I don't know everything, but…" That goes out the window. People just kind of lose awareness that they do only see a small piece.

And I do think that that is a human thing that we do a lot. We forget. We forget our fallibility when we're kind of… Yeah. I think that it happens. So, yes, I agree with you. I don't think anybody would say, "I'm omniscient." But maybe the individual difference, getting to your question about that, the true individual difference is about how often you're able to apply this meta cognitive awareness across contexts, how reliably you're able to do that, how appropriately you're able to do it, so it becomes about kind of frequency and calibration of that questioning to a given situation. And being in the habit of doing it. And would you agree with me that people are gonna differ in that habit?

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, so what this is sort of making me confront is I was a little too quick to look to the extremes of a continuum as evidence for the existence of a continuum. And so, yeah, maybe it's very, very rare for someone to truly say, "I absolutely have all the answers, and no one has anything I don't know." But I could imagine that there's some degree of difference, relative difference, in willingness to say, "Yeah, I don't know everything, but come on. I've lived this life. I've seen a lot of things. I think I know a thing or two about a thing or two." And that's not absolute ignorance of your fallibility, but it's a willingness to say, "Oh, come on. I think I… Give me some credit here. I know something." So, that's part of it.

And the other thing is it sort of raises the distinction that I know has been made between domain general versus domain specific intellectual humility, so can you explain a little bit what that distinction is?

Tenelle Porter:
Sure. And this is pulling from some of Rick Hoyle's work and others, where the idea is that you can maybe be intellectually humble in general, so you think on a high level that your beliefs, regardless of the context, are fallible. You just have this awareness about the totality of your beliefs that they may be fallible. The domain specific version says, "Okay, I can have varying degrees of awareness of my fallibility depending on the belief itself. So, I can be very intellectually humble about vaccine safety and not very intellectually humble about my beliefs on gun control or vice versa." Just saying that people are gonna vary in how willing they are to admit or acknowledge the limitations of their beliefs depending on the belief itself.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, so-

Tenelle Porter:
How about we try that again?

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. No, no. That makes sense to me. I mean, just in… I'll sort of say what I have picked up in my reading of it, and you can tell me if I'm a little too open with my interpretation, which is just like you can think of domains as just areas of expertise, and you go, "Domain general just means," like you said, in the world of the things I know, are there things that I know or don't know? Just in the world. Do I think I'm the kind of person who's able to always have the right answer to things? Maybe sometimes yeah, maybe sometimes no. But in a certain situation, I go my job, I may feel as though I know more about the human condition than I actually do because I've spent all these years reading papers about a thin sliver of the human condition, and so I may actually be a little less intellectually humble about this world that I work on when I probably ought to be a little more so. Even though in general I might consider myself quite intellectually humble.

I go, "Yeah, but there are some things that I do think I have a leg up on the world about." And I'm less willing to trust these lay theories of psychology, because what do they know about the life they live?

Tenelle Porter:
Yeah. I really like that. And I think what you're saying raises a question that has yet to be explored, so for future intellectual humility researchers out there listening, when is it appropriate to have less intellectual humility? I mean, is it appropriate to have less intellectual humility about the safety and viability of the COVID vaccines? What's the… That's an interesting question because we have real data that speaks to the safety of these vaccines that can be brought to bear, and so especially I think when we get into talking about domain specific intellectual humility, and we're thinking about this as a virtue, which means it needs to be appropriately calibrated to the situation and the evidence at hand, we can hold open the possibility that having really high specific

intellectual humility about all beliefs may not be virtuous and may not be a good thing. And teasing apart what are the contexts or what are the conditions that make specific intellectual humility virtuous versus not is work that still needs to be done.

Andy Luttrell:
I've been reading a lot about climate change denial campaigns and the sort of rhetoric that's been used therein, and a lot of this presenting, going back to tobacco lobbyists and tobacco companies many years ago, where they go, "Our only job is to keep the debate alive, to constantly cast doubt and go we haven't actually proven this yet." And in fact, many of those same folks who were in these tobacco campaigns ended up being heavy hitters in questioning global warming, and acid rain, and all these sorts of things. And the throughline is this idea of they desperately want to present issues as unresolved, which kind of feels like the intellectual humility approach to go, "Oh, we'll never, ever truly know the right answer."

Tenelle Porter:
That's right.

Andy Luttrell:
But you go, "Well, maybe at a certain point we ought to close the book on some of these things," and go, "Ought we present this as such an open debate or is that actually misleading?" And we, to your point, maybe say, "This is a case where we're not completely shutting the door. We could still be wrong. But maybe we'll move on to other domains where we can explore the questions openly in that way."

Tenelle Porter:
Absolutely. Absolutely right. Yeah. That is what I'm thinking. Yeah. I'm working with a philosopher, Oded Zipory, to try to kind of come up with these criteria. I mean, we see these claims to humility sometimes, to intellectual humility. Think about the election denial as one of them, the nicotine trials being another very intentionally sowing doubt, but you know, one thing I think that characterizes election denialism is that folks denying the election results aren't willing to question the fallibility of their own denial. And so, that becomes a kind of interesting thing to play with as we, as a public, are having to sort through a mess of so much information and trying to make sense of it all, needing to make sense of it all. It's like thinking about intellectual humility for me, but not for thee, or the other way around. Intellectual humility for thee but not for me.

And I think that's just a big red flag showing us that that's not authentic, virtuous intellectual humility. When you're asking other people to have it, when you're saying, "No, no. We'll never know," but you seem to have already come to the conclusion yourself with some degree of extreme certainty, that seems disingenuous to me. And I guess the other part that what you said made me think of is that I think it is important to maybe always hold open that centimeter of a chance that we could overturn what we already know, because we do make new discoveries, and part of intellectual humility is being open to overturn knowledge. There was a time when we thought that the earth was flat. There was a time when that was the prevailing science of the day. A time when we thought that all of the planets revolved around the earth.

I mean, there are moments when we take great leaps forward and have to paradigm shift and disregard what we thought was true. Intellectual humility allows us to do that, but we have to be very careful about it because I don't think that it's virtuous or helpful to be living in extreme doubt about matters on which our current gold standard evidence is suggesting that this is the current answer.

Andy Luttrell:
Can you pinpoint what about this is interesting to you? What brought you to this topic?

Tenelle Porter:
Yeah. Thanks for that question. I think that the topic is really fascinating. So, I was a grad student way back. Way back in the day I was a grad student, and I had these experiences in my classes feeling like, especially early, in the first couple years of grad school, where there was so much negotiation around knowledge in classrooms. People were trying… It felt like people were trying to seem like they knew a lot. I didn't feel like I knew very much, but everybody else seemed to think they knew a lot, and I just became kind of fascinated with the social role that our own knowledge and showing doubt, or showing ignorance to others, how that plays out in all kinds of situations.

I guess I was also kind of noticing differences in professors, so I had professors who would be pretty closed to questioning of their ideas and pretty dismissive of critiques, and maybe that dismissiveness was warranted in a sense. I can't remember specifics. But I had other kinds of professors who weren't dismissive and who were open to questioning and seeing those two orientations of people in this context, where we're all supposed to be about learning and new discovery, it was just interesting to me. I just noted it.

So, it's very fascinating. I think that it's such a puzzle to figure out what's the appropriate level of intellectual humility for the given situation. What can this do for us? When does this become maladaptive? When is it adaptive? It gets down to kind of… Yeah. I'll stop. I'm just rambling.

Andy Luttrell:
No, that was great. And I wanted to also talk about the work that you do like actually in education, which incorporates intellectual humility, as well, but in kind of a different flavor it seems to me. Maybe you don't see them as distinct, but to me there's a version of this that's kind of a very highfalutin, the philosophers debating in the marketplace of ideas, and then a version of that that's kids navigating an education system that is asking them to know things. And so, what is it about intellectual humility that matters to students in school?

Tenelle Porter:
Yeah. Intellectual humility helps students in school learn and grow just the same as it helps us adults learn and grow through disagreements. One concern that I had about humility was whether intellectually humble students might become really helpless as soon as they encountered a challenge or setback. Maybe they are so humble they recognize they are fallible, and so when challenges come at them, they just sort of throw up their hands and it's just kind of like, "Well, this is the way it is. I'm never gonna know. I'm kind of helpless here and that's just what it's gonna be." I was concerned about that. The opposite to the helplessness pattern is a mastery pattern where

students encounter challenges and are like, “Okay, maybe this feels uncomfortable but also I’m really interested in getting to the bottom of this and trying to understand it better.” And so, with some colleagues we did studies to see which is it. Is intellectual humility leading to this kind of helplessness or is it associated with mastery?

And we found that the more intellectually humble the students were, the more they seemed to care about getting it right. So, when they would be confronted with their fallibility and their mistakes, the more effortful and persistent they became in overcoming those mistakes and kind of getting it right, striving to learn, because they wanted to be accurate. And they were willing to acknowledge that something wasn’t quite right. They were more open to feedback from their teachers or their professors coming to them and saying, “You know, this needs some work.” Okay. All right, I could see that. Let me… Can you work with me to improve it?

So, there’s studies out about that, and ultimately there’s some evidence that intellectually humbler students earn higher grades. I think that finding probably depends a lot on how you measure intellectual humility and what parts of it you’re measuring. I’m not sure that those items that are just asking about political beliefs or something like that are gonna be super associated one way or the other with your grades in school. However, being aware of generally your fallibility, being willing to express that as part of intellectual humility, it does help.

Andy Luttrell:
So, the kind of two competing possibilities also kind of remind me of another aspect. I forget I was gonna tie it back to, but the question of does intellectual humility require something of your belief that there is a right answer, right? Because there’s a version of it like you’re saying where you go, “There’s no right answer. That’s what intellectual humility is, is realizing I am fallible, I don’t know everything, therefore I’ll never know the right answer to these questions.” Versus a very subtly different version where you go, “No, I do think there is a right answer and the only way to get there is to be open to the fact that I might not have gotten it right yet.” Which is kind of like what we were saying about how calibrated are you. Are there cases where you go that question only makes sense if people go, “Oh no, if there’s a right answer I might have it, actually. I might actually be on the right side, and so it might actually be maladaptive for me to keep my mind open about this because I figured it out.”

And so, yeah, I don’t know what folks have talked about in this world of does it require that people think that there’s a right answer? Is that part and parcel of intellectual humility? Or is that like this independent dimension that changes the course of what humility does for people?

Tenelle Porter:
Super interesting, Andy. That’s super interesting. Yeah. People talk about intellectual humility in terms of truth. People talk about… Philosophers talk about how intellectually humble people love the truth. And so, the truth connotes this idea that there is rightness-

Andy Luttrell:
A truth.

Tenelle Porter:
That there is a truth. That's right. I think that when we talk about right and wrong answers, it's probably more helpful to talk about the spectrum of it can be righter or wronger, and we're always trying to move a little bit closer to what's right, but maybe at the end of that tunnel I guess is what I'm arguing is that there is a kind of platonic ideal, like there is truth out there somewhere, and intellectual humility is supposed to be moving us closer to that. And that's what intellectually humble people care about most, is getting closer to that. And that's why they are willing to change their beliefs about things when evidence suggests that they ought to, because they care about being accurate and about getting closer to this truth.

And I feel like that's something that can help us in society today. If we value that, do you believe that there's a truth? But if we value the truth, it can kind of… thinking of our political disputes, I don't know.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. There might be different domains where truth is more or less relevant, right? There are beliefs about the world where there's something is right or it's wrong, and then your classic preference or attitudes, right?

Tenelle Porter:
Agreed.

Andy Luttrell:
Do I need to believe there's a true best flavor of ice cream? No, I think we'll be alright if we accept that there's not one right answer to that. But you know, is our climate changing? It either is or it isn't and there is a right answer to that question. Yeah. The danger of, it seems, interpreting intellectual humility as just pure openness just means there's no goal, right? You're not moving… You're just sort of flopping around and then you go, "I explored ideas," and maybe that's enough, but yeah, it does seem like that's an assumption that matters for how you interpret what this does for you.

Tenelle Porter:
I agree. I agree. I really like that.

Andy Luttrell:
And in schools, the thing is it's possible that if a school system is really built as they often are to be like, "There are right answers to test questions," that sets the rules of the game differently than in some of these other domains that we're talking about. And so, maybe that's a case where yeah, intellectual humility is good because you go, "Okay, there is gonna be a right answer. There's an answer that's gonna win me the points, that's the right one, and so having this mindset helps me get there." And so, if that's the case, are there ways that we can encourage kids to adopt that mindset more?

Tenelle Porter:
Yeah. My new favorite method for increasing development of intellectual humility is modeling it ourselves. And this is hard. This is hard. It's not always easy to express it when you have gotten

something wrong. It's not always easy to reveal that to your kids. If you are perhaps a parent or a teacher out there and you're trying to teach your kids something, it's not always easy to admit, "I don't know everything there is to know about what I'm trying to teach you." I mean, I've figured it out, and come along this far, and I know a lot about it, and that's just the truth. I know a lot about it. I actually know more than you do. But I don't know everything there is to know. That can feel hard, but what we're learning in our research is that it's really powerful when teachers are able to do that and those are the only studies that we have on teachers or professors. But I imagine we'd see a similar pattern with parents and maybe even across other domains if you think about if your doctor showed some humility, or your nurse.

So, we're finding that when folks are able to model humility for young people, it licenses a kind of vulnerability. It just says this is a space where your own vulnerability is going to be welcomed and accepted. And students therefore and children become more comfortable expressing intellectual humility themselves.

Andy Luttrell:
Can you say what it looks like to show intellectual… If I am to try to do this, right, and model for my kid this way of approaching the world, I may personally have these values, but what will I want to make sure I'm expressing overtly in a way that someone could pick up?

Tenelle Porter:
I think that you want to express that even areas where you know a lot, you don't know everything there is to know, and there's a chance that you could learn something new. I think you'd want to express that there are many different ways to approach a problem usually, that your way may not be the only way, and you're capable of learning even from your child about how to solve a particular problem. And I think you'd want to communicate that mistakes are really special and valuable opportunities for learning. Mistakes can feel so painful. They feel sometimes like… I don't know. Not something that can enhance our growth. And I think we, as parents and teachers, we may often want to protect the kids that we care about so much from feeling the pain that comes with mistakes, and sometimes in that urge to protect them we deny that a mistake has even happened, but what humility can offer us, I think, is this chance to say, "You know what? I did make a mistake, and look, it's that's great. I'm gonna remember that for a really long time. I just learned something really important. I'm gonna take that with me. It's great. It's wonderful. It's part of being alive."

So, those things, I would say.

Andy Luttrell:
My toddler's favorite words are, "Uh oh." So, I think we're okay. It's constantly… Even when stuff is like, "Hey, I don't really see what went wrong here." Uh oh! Uh oh! I go, "Oh, okay. Well, maybe whatever you think you did, if you think it's wrong we'll not do it next time." But I am curious. How different is this from growth mindset? Because kind of what you described sounded to me like how you would describe modeling a growth mindset. Is that different or are we saying these are two areas that have kind of come upon the same insight?

Tenelle Porter:
Right. I think that there is some overlap in how you model a growth mindset and how you model intellectual humility. A growth mindset, the targets are different, though. A growth mindset is about developing a belief that our abilities are malleable and that they can be developed, and intellectual humility is about developing a belief that we're human and we don't have all of the answers. What we see in the research is this connection between growth mindset and intellectual humility, that the more you have a growth mindset, the easier it is for you to also have intellectual humility. Because your fallibility isn't a kind of final word on your competence. You can always grow and improve.

So, they're definitely… These concepts are related for sure. I also see them as distinct, but there is gonna be some overlap in how to model them. Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:
So, what's next on the agenda for you? What are the new questions that you and folks that you're working with are starting to chip away at?

Tenelle Porter:
Oh. I mean, one area of questions that fascinates me is thinking about intellectual humility and justice. So, what do we make of intellectual humility when we bring power into the equation and think about issues of social justice? Is it incumbent upon a group that has been pushed to the margins of society to be intellectually humble about certain beliefs? Is it as incumbent upon that individual as it is upon an individual who has a lot of power in a certain situation? So, this is a fascinating question, and I'm part of a working group now that's gonna be reading about this, and talking about it, and trying to understand it more.

But some work that I have in the pipeline right now just in development is trying to understand what are the experiences of diverse students when it comes to expressing intellectual humility? Like actually speaking up and saying, "Well, I don't know what that is," or, "That's confusing to me," or, "Oh, I got that one wrong." What is that like for diverse students? And what we're seeing is that there are more barriers to doing that for students who face a sort of stigma because of their identity, whose competence is called into question because of who they are and because of their identity. So, you think of a woman in a computer science class. The stereotype is that women aren't great in computer science, so a woman in a computer science class has to think really hard about whether she's gonna raise her hand and voice her question because people are already kind of perhaps doubting whether she can take it in this class.

So, that's coming through loud and clear, and in some of the work that we're doing now, in interviews with a bunch of different college students, so that's I think part of that piece of understanding intellectual humility and power and justice and how all of those things come together.

Andy Luttrell:
Nice. Well, I will be excited to see what comes of that.

Tenelle Porter:
Hey, thank you.

Andy Luttrell:
It's getting late, so I'm going to go ahead and call it here.

Tenelle Porter:
All right. Yes, it is. Okay. Sounds good.

Andy Luttrell:
Thanks for taking the time to talk about all this.

Tenelle Porter:
My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Andy Luttrell:
Alrighty, that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thanks so much to Tenelle for coming by—literally—to talk with me about her work. You can find more at tenelleporter.com, or just check the webpage for this episode for a link to her site and to the papers that came up in our conversation.

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Okeedoke, one more episode for 2022 coming in a couple weeks! See you then. Buh bye…