

Humility and Transcendence: From Medieval Art and Culture to Schleiermacher and Schopenhauer

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 28(01), 1332-1336

Publication history: Received on 05 September 2025; revised on 16 October 2025; accepted on 19 October 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.28.1.3555>

Abstract

This work explores the evolution of the concept of humility from medieval art to the modern philosophies of Schleiermacher and Schopenhauer. In the Middle Ages, humility was expressed as a theological and aesthetic virtue at the service of the divine and the community. Schleiermacher re-signified it as an existential openness to the Absolute, while Schopenhauer secularized it as compassion and the renunciation of the ego in the face of suffering. Through a hermeneutic-comparative approach, it is evident that humility constitutes a fundamental symbolic and anthropological axis for understanding transcendence and rethinking the current fragile human condition.

Keywords: Humility; Transcendence; Modern Philosophy; Shopenhauer; Schleiermacher

1. Introduction

Humility as a quality represents an attitude of openness that allows one to recognize human limitations and weaknesses, thanks to a deep understanding of oneself and one's place in the world. Humility has been a cardinal virtue both in the Christian tradition and in different philosophical currents that recognize the limits of existence. In medieval art, humility is manifested in the artist's service to the divine. It has also been an axial value in Western culture, especially in the Middle Ages, where it was linked to the search for transcendence and spiritual life.

In medieval art, humility was embodied in the artistic practice itself. Aesthetic representation was in itself a notion of humility. The builders of cathedrals and the authors of altarpieces rarely signed their works: what was important was not personal glory, but service to God and the community. Images of the crucified Christ, the Virgin in prayer, or hermit saints conveyed that the path to fullness involved oblation and obedience. Medieval aesthetics educated in humility, recalling that artistic talent was a divine gift at the service of the faithful people (1). Medieval aesthetics understood art as a sacred activity, a divine gift that the artist had to handle with humility for the glory of God and the education of the faithful, thus integrating artistic expression within the framework of a theocentric society.

For his part, Schleiermacher (2), theologian and philosopher, re-signified humility as openness to the absolute in his theology and hermeneutics, in the feeling of absolute dependence on God and humility as a condition of the religious subject; transforming humility into an anthropological disposition of openness to the infinite. In the thought of the philosopher Schopenhauer (3), in turn, there is the renunciation of the self in the face of the universal will, Secularizing humility, associating it with compassion and the negation of egoism as a path to transcendence; exposing humility and compassion as forms of transcendence in the face of suffering.

These thinkers embody two ways of thinking about humility and transcendence—one from faith and the other from secular philosophy—which allows for a fertile contrast and a symbolic continuity with the medieval tradition. Despite

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belonging to very different contexts, these visions converge on the same axis: the recognition that the human being is not the absolute center of reality. In modernity, thinkers like Schleiermacher and Schopenhauer reconfigure the place of humility in relation to religious experience (feeling of absolute dependence) and pessimistic philosophy (renunciation, compassion).

In a world marked by narcissism, technification, and self-affirmation, recovering the reflection on humility offers critical and existential keys. The study aims to contribute to current debates on ethics, spirituality, and culture, showing that humility is not just a medieval legacy, but a current horizon for the understanding and survival of the human condition. This study aims to build bridges between medieval aesthetics and modern philosophy, deepen the symbolic dimension of cultural values, and contribute to recovering humility as a critical, ethical, and transcendental category.

In this context, we pose the following problem: how is the notion of humility transformed from its expression in medieval art to the modern philosophies of transcendence? We will analyze the evolution of the concept of humility as a cultural and philosophical category, from medieval art to Schleiermacher and Schopenhauer, to understand its link with the idea of transcendence.

2. Methodology

The research resorts to a Qualitative Approach. Hermeneutic-comparative Method, with Analysis of medieval representations (paintings, stained glass, sculptures). Textual exegesis of the works of Schleiermacher and Schopenhauer. Cross-sectional comparison of concepts (humility, transcendence). Primary sources: works of the philosophers, medieval manuscripts, sacred art. Secondary sources: studies on art history, philosophy of religion, hermeneutics, cultural anthropology, psychology.

2.1. The Representations of Humility in Medieval Art

The Middle Ages are represented from the 5th century to the 15th century, between antiquity and the Renaissance. The latter is considered the moment of splendor, of "lights," of the dominance of reason, and consequently of anthropocentrism. A concept opposite to medieval theocentrism, which placed God as the core, and Christianity as the axis of earthly life (4).

Medieval art in this context was at the service of Christian dogma, which was the dominant religion of the time, after the Roman emperor Constantine, in the year 313, promulgated the Edict of Tolerance of Milan, allowing Christian worship—and other cults—thus stopping the persecutions. Christianity would emerge from a context of crisis and persecution, and art would be used to transmit its teachings to a largely illiterate population (5). Humility in medieval Christianity was not only a moral virtue, but a theological, spiritual, and social pillar that was conceived as a Christian virtue linked to salvation through the imitation of Christ; to monastic life and the exaltation of the Virgin Mary.

Christ (6) was presented as a model, in Philippians 2:6-8: Christ, being God, emptied himself and took the form of a servant even to death on the cross. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus expresses: "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart." From the Old Testament, in Proverbs 11:2: humility is opposed to pride, and in Isaiah 66:2: God looks at the humble and contrite of heart. Subsequently, Saint Augustine would affirm that humility is the path to truth (7).

From medieval art, we have icons that express this humility, such as the Nativity Relief in the Chartres Cathedral (13th century). Here, an extremely simple and tender scene is observed: the Child Jesus lies in a humble manger, flanked by animals—a symbol of incarnation in poverty—a clear manifestation of Christ's humility. In the Illumination of the Washing of the Feet from the Gospels of Henry the Lion (12th century, Germany). Christ is seen kneeling while washing Peter's feet. This gesture perfectly visualizes the renunciation of power and the commitment to service of the Savior, according to the Gospel. The greatness of the divine is manifested in simplicity, service, and renunciation.

2.2. Humility as Openness to the Absolute in Schleiermacher's Theology and Hermeneutics

Friedrich Schleiermacher lived between the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the beginning of the industrial revolution. The Enlightenment tended to reduce religion to morality or reason, while the Romantics highlighted feeling, the infinite, and the subjective. Schleiermacher sought a bridge between modern reason and Christian faith. Humility is not only a moral virtue but an existential disposition of dependence on the absolute. This notion of absolute dependence and humility as the condition of the religious subject marks his profound conception of humility not only as a requirement but as an inescapable openness to religious spirituality.

The human being is not self-sufficient, he argued, and was even very critical of the Enlightenment thought of the time, stating: "You have managed to make earthly life so rich and multifaceted that you no longer need eternity" (2) (p.4) Schleiermacher (2) rejected the idea that religion is only morality or metaphysical doctrine. For him, religion has its own domain, irreducible to either ethics or science. Religion was intuition and feeling profoundly fused. The feeling of absolute dependence on God was not something merely emotional or transient, but the living consciousness of the finite in the face of the infinite, recognizing nonetheless that every individual was a necessary complementary piece for the full intuition of humanity. Faith was not born from accepting rational propositions, but from an inner experience, which was shared in a religious community.

Theological doctrine in that context was nothing more than reflection on that experience, not its foundation, developing the notion of absolute dependence. From which he considers Christ as the being in whom the consciousness of human dependence is fully and perfectly realized. Consequently, this notion of dependence is a form of existential humility, as it implies recognizing that the human being is not self-sufficient. Therefore, redemption is an act of profound humility that transforms consciousness and life in community thanks to Christ. "Speaking of religion cannot be an expression of pride, for it is always full of humility" (8, p.11). Consequently, to transcend is to go beyond direct human experience, in search of the whole with God.

2.3. The World as Blind Will and Humility as a Form of Transcendence, in Schopenhauer's Thought

Arthur Schopenhauer (3) developed a more secular and pessimistic vision. According to him, the world is governed by the Will, a blind, irrational, eternal, universal, and unconscious force that generates pain, suffering, struggle, and insatiable desire. The Will is the essence of the world. The way out consists of the renunciation of willing, in asceticism and in aesthetic contemplation that momentarily suspends the ego. In this renunciation, a form of radical humility is revealed: the recognition that the individual is not his own master, but part of a totality that exceeds him.

Although Schopenhauer does not resort to God, his philosophy coincides with medieval art and with Schleiermacher in pointing out that human greatness emerges to the extent that the ego steps aside. Art, in Schopenhauer, momentarily suspends the pain of willing. Contemplating the beautiful is a disinterested act, as it implies setting aside the self and its desires. In this context, to transcend for the philosopher means to free oneself from the dominance of the Will (the blind and irrational force that drives all existence) and the principle of sufficient reason.

For Schopenhauer (3), humility is a natural consequence of recognizing the suffering and vanity inherent in human existence. It is an act of intelligence and authenticity that allows one to live with honesty and peace. Humility is a condition for freeing oneself from the chains of external approval and the continuous search for importance. The external world is a set of representations that compel beings to blindly pursue their goals or survival desires devoid of ethics, producing immense misfortune and suffering. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer proposes the liberation from this boundless will, with the contemplation of art, where one forgets oneself, annihilating one's will. The second path is the radical denial of the will to live under desires, to free oneself from the suffering inherent in existence. Through practices such as chastity, poverty, and the mortification of the body, the ascetic seeks to achieve indifference toward worldly things. This process implies the overcoming of the ego to recognize the unity of all being, in a global empathy, seeking a state of definitive quietude and peace. Transcending the self replete with blind will and personal desire. Schopenhauer finds the being in the whole, humble and integral, master of himself.

2.4. Continuities of Humility in Medieval and Modern Philosophy

In the Middle Ages, God is the center of the universe. The human being is subject to His designs, and if he has any power, it is expressed in the humble acceptance of the divine will, in the praying individual, in the suppliant and obedient faithful. In this context, humility in the Middle Ages is conceived as a Christian virtue linked to salvation and the imitation of Christ. In the 18th century, Schleiermacher (8), in turn, perceives the human being in absolute dependence on the divinity, sustaining the conception of a minuscule and humble human being. Religion for this author consists in conceiving everything particular as part of the whole. "Everything limited as a manifestation of the infinite" (8, p.38).

Religion allows a pious spirit to perceive the whole as sacred, including the profane and ordinary. Religion for the author is an enemy of pedantry, leaning instead towards the spirit of simplicity and modesty. The religious is not only a rational or intuitive contemplation but also a deep affective experience. Contact with the eternal leaves a lasting imprint on consciousness and the perception of reality, so that even the everyday is illuminated by that experience. The religious experience is unique because it integrates feeling and intuition, and because the eternal acts in us as a luminous force that not only eclipses everything else at the moment of the experience but continues to permeate our perception long after.

For his part, Schopenhauer (3) secularizes humility, associating it with compassion and the negation of egoism as a path to transcendence. Thus, medieval humility of submitting to God has a secular parallel in Schopenhauer: renunciation of the ego, the source of blind will, in search of peace and the absence of suffering. Consequently, there is a common thread that connects medieval humility with modern philosophy: the recognition of human limitation in the face of a superior reality (God, the absolute, the will).

2.5. Breaks and Re-significations of Humility Between the Medieval Imaginary and Modern Philosophy

Nevertheless, the God of the Middle Ages, who receives all oblations and offerings through the art and architecture of cathedrals and churches, imposing a profound humility on the faithful, is not the same God as Schleiermacher's, who recognizes man's deep dependence on God, separating himself from the earthly sphere, but allowing for the interpretation of sacred texts. With Schopenhauer, humility is no longer a virtue toward God, whom he denies. Religion is merely the metaphysics of the people. The philosopher, under the influence of Eastern thought, re-signifies humility as renunciation and compassion, generating new forms of transcendence in the face of suffering, displacing the concept of God.

2.6. Current Projections

Humility is not a virtue of the will (something that is done), but an intrinsic characteristic of personal freedom (something that one is). Humility is not an ethical quality that is chosen, but a necessary disposition of the being that allows man to fully develop in his freedom, by recognizing and accepting his position in the world in a just manner. Without humility, the person would lack the correct perspective on himself and his relationship with the Creator (9).

Currently, there is talk of "cultural humility," which represents a lifelong commitment to self-reflection and continuous learning about the cultures of others and one's own. An active commitment to examining one's own prejudices and mitigating power imbalances in interpersonal relationships. A commitment to self-criticism and learning (10). Humble people are motivated by pure interests related to the rights afforded by their capacity to serve as means to some valuable purpose or project (11). This conception converges with the individual perspective of psychology, which seeks to conceptualize and measure humility as a virtue that is distinguished from low self-esteem or modesty, focusing on low self-focus and the ability to keep one's own capabilities and achievements in perspective (12), preventing excesses of individual self-affirmation that promote a being enclosed in moral subjectivity and in itself (13). Humility as an antidote to the hypertrophy of the self (14), which needs to accept not knowing and surrender to listening to the other (15). A hermeneutical humility, as a fundamental philosophical principle (16).

3. Conclusion

Humility, an abstract and earthly quality, is revealed as an anthropological condition that spans the cultural and philosophical history of the West. In the Middle Ages, it was the axis of a theocentric aesthetic and spirituality, oriented toward the service of God and the community. In modernity, Schleiermacher re-signified it as an existential openness to the Absolute, while Schopenhauer secularized it as compassion and the renunciation of the ego in the face of suffering. In both cases, humility operates as a reminder of human finitude and the need to transcend the self.

This journey demonstrates a continuity: the human being is never the absolute center of reality. Rather, humility marks the limit of self-affirmation and opens the horizon of transcendence, whether religious or philosophical. In a present dominated by narcissism and self-exploitation, recovering humility as an ethical and cultural category is not only an exercise in historical memory but a critical urgency for rethinking the human condition. Thus, humility, in its diverse expressions, is not only a medieval echo or a virtue but a symbolic and practical key for communal life: a call to open ourselves to the other, to the absolute or to the distinct, and to recognize that human greatness is played out in the modesty of knowing ourselves to be part of a whole that transcends us.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my colleagues of international cooperation, Damien Prillieux and Luc Jarrige for their original support.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest related to this research

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