

# A Quiet Ego Quiets Death Anxiety: Humility as an Existential Anxiety Buffer

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Five studies tested the hypothesis that a quiet ego, as exemplified by humility, would buffer death anxiety. Humility is characterized by a willingness to accept the self and life without comforting illusions, and by low levels of self-focus. As a consequence, it was expected to render mortality thoughts less threatening and less likely to evoke potentially destructive behavior patterns. In line with this reasoning, Study 1 found that people high in humility do not engage in self-serving moral disengagement following mortality reminders, whereas people low in humility do. Study 2 showed that only people low in humility respond to death reminders with increased fear of death, and established that this effect was driven uniquely by humility and not by some other related personality trait. In Study 3, a low sense of psychological entitlement decreased cultural worldview defense in response to death thoughts, whereas a high sense of entitlement tended to increase it. Study 4 demonstrated that priming humility reduces self-reported death anxiety relative to both a baseline and a pride priming condition. Finally, in Study 5, experimentally induced feelings of humility prevented mortality reminders from leading to depleted self-control. As a whole, these findings obtained from relatively diverse Internet samples illustrate that the dark side of death anxiety is brought about by a noisy ego only and not by a quiet ego, revealing self-transcendence as a sturdier, healthier anxiety buffer than self-enhancement.

*Keywords:* humility, entitlement, terror management theory, self-transcendence, virtue

Humility—the ability to see the self in true perspective—has long been extolled by religious and philosophical traditions. Writers ancient and modern have considered it a virtue, while deploring and mocking its absence (Lewis, 1952/2001; Marlowe, 1604/1995; Shelley, 1818/1994). Recent empirical research similarly reveals humility as a widely valued and highly regarded personality trait (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Landrum, 2011). The current research program examined the desirability of humility from a previously unexplored angle and put to test the idea that a sense of humility buffers death anxiety. Humility involves a willingness to accept the self's limits and its place in the grand scheme of things, accompanied by low levels of self-preoccupation. As such, it should render the self less vulnerable to threats, of which death constitutes a major and perpetually present instance. Five studies tested the idea that high levels of trait and state humility would be associated with lower death anxiety and lower defensiveness in the face of death thoughts.

## His Majesty the Self

It has been said that the self is at once our greatest ally and fiercest enemy (Leary, 2004). A highly developed sense of self and

the attendant capacities for self-awareness, self-control, and self-evaluation are invaluable tools for goal attainment. Their emergence must have conferred game-changing evolutionary advantages to our ancestors, allowing the development of culture and civilization. Despite its extraordinary affordances, however, having a self is not an unmitigated blessing: The self has a way of distorting the way we perceive reality (Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988), and self-generated thoughts and feelings are responsible for a great deal of human suffering (Ingram, 1990). The self can be psychologically so burdensome at times that the urge to escape it takes self-destructive forms such as drug and alcohol abuse, binge eating, and even suicide (Baumeister, 1991).

A robust phenomenon associated with having a self is the desire to see it in a positive light. The intertwined motives for self-esteem, self-enhancement, and self-protection are exceptionally strong (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides, 1993), and engender what has been referred to as “a self-zoo full of self-defense mechanisms” (Tesser, 2001, p. 66). Attesting to the dramatic way in which reality is perceived from behind self-serving lenses, people overestimate their virtues and underestimate their vices, take more credit for positive outcomes and less responsibility for negative outcomes than they deserve, judge their possessions and people close to them exceptionally favorably, and think they are better than average on almost any desirable quality (Dunning, 2005).

These self-serving biases and a high self-esteem in general are linked to happiness and mental health (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor, Lerner,

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Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003), yet they do come at a price. For one, the hunger for perceiving “me and mine” favorably is bound to lead to inaccurate perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world (Gilovich, 1991). Furthermore, relentlessly striving to maintain and present a certain image of the self can prove destructive or self-destructive. Research finds that the pursuit of self-esteem can reduce learning and prosocial behavior, impair self-regulation, increase aggression in the face of ego threats, and end up proving detrimental to one’s mental and physical health (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Crocker & Park, 2004; Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994).

The recognition of this dark side of the self has generated an interest in the “quiet ego” in recent years (see Wayment & Bauer, 2008, for a review). Research on topics such as self-compassion (Neff, 2003), ecosystem versus egosystem perspectives (Crocker, 2008), and hypoeoic self-processes (Leary & Guadagno, 2011) explored ways of transcending self-preoccupation and arriving at a less defensive stance toward the self and others. The theme unifying these diverse threads of research was that a quieter ego would be less under the “curse of the self” (Leary, 2004), less prone to self-flattering and self-comforting yet costly behavior patterns, and ultimately more conducive to well-being.

### Humility: The Quiet Self

Humility is a personality trait that substantially overlaps with the notion of a quiet ego.<sup>1</sup> Aided by the positive psychology movement, recent years have witnessed a growing interest in humility as a research topic (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, Chapter 20; Tangney, 2000). This body of work portrays humility very positively—as a virtue, a character strength, and an expression of spiritual intelligence (Emmons, 1999). Specifically, humility has been related to forgiveness, generosity, helpfulness, better social relationships, and excellence in leadership; and found to be negatively associated with some less desirable personality traits such as neuroticism and narcissism (Collins, 2001; Davis et al., 2013; Exline & Hill, 2012; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Peters & Rowatt, 2011; Rowatt et al., 2006; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004).

What is humility, and what does it entail? As conceptualized by contemporary social psychologists, “an accurate assessment of one’s characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a forgetting of the self” constitute the core attributes of humility (Tangney, 2002, p. 411). A humble person is first and foremost capable of tolerating an honest look at the self and non-defensively accepting weaknesses alongside strengths (Exline, 2008). This does not represent a sense of inferiority or self-denigration, but rather lack of self-aggrandizing biases. The propensity for seeing the self in true perspective is typically accompanied by an awareness of the self’s smallness in the grand scheme of things. Humble people tend to be more sensitive and feel more connected to forces larger than themselves, be this force God, humanity, nature, or the cosmos (Worthington, 2007). Finally, and relatedly, those who stand in humility exhibit a remarkable lack of self-focus and a talent for self-forgetfulness, for becoming “unserved” (Tangney, 2000). They are easily able to take themselves out of the middle of the picture and direct attention toward the greater world beyond. In seeing, honoring, and potentially contributing to something bigger

than themselves, they transcend egotistical concerns and the attendant urge for defensive, self-serving maneuvers.

### The Mortal Self

One of the most onerous burdens that come with self-consciousness is the anticipatory anxiety about death. All humans, as all living organisms, are going to die; however, unlike the rest of these organisms who lack the capacity for self-conscious, temporal, and abstract thought, humans are condemned to go through life fully aware of the reality of death. This awareness can be a source of terrorizing anxiety for the self-aware animal that is biologically wired for self-preservation. Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) was erected on this insight, and posited that to be able to function effectively in the world, people need to keep the terrorizing knowledge of inevitable mortality at bay. This is accomplished through an existential anxiety buffering system, the key ingredients of which are a sense of value, meaning, security, and transcendence. These ingredients are oftentimes provided by self-esteem, faith in one’s cultural worldview, and close interpersonal relations. Since its inception, hundreds of studies have tested and supported hypotheses derived from TMT, and have demonstrated that death anxiety is a central motivating force for the human psyche, playing a role in domains as diverse as religion and spirituality, legal decision making, human sexuality, materialism, and psychopathology (for an overview, see Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2012).

The question of why people need self-esteem so ardently was one of the original questions that begot TMT, and the role that self-esteem plays in terror management processes has been studied extensively (for overviews, see Arndt, 2012; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004; Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2013). A large body of research supports the notion that self-esteem is a critical component of the existential anxiety buffer. Both experimentally induced and dispositionally high self-esteem have been shown to be associated with lower levels of anxiety, worldview defense, and death-thought accessibility in response to mortality reminders (Greenberg et al. 1992; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Research also finds that death-thought accessibility increases when people think about their “undesired self” (Ogilvie, Cohen, & Solomon, 2008), or when their self-esteem is directly threatened (J. Hayes, Schimel, Faucher, & Williams, 2008). In further support of the existentially protective function of self-esteem, death thoughts have been demonstrated to amplify striving for self-esteem in domains one is invested in (e.g., Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000; Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999; Vess & Arndt, 2008).

The evidence points to self-esteem as a fundamental resource in dealing with the fragile and finite nature of life. Yet the desirability of high self-esteem as an existential anxiety buffer remains dis-

<sup>1</sup> In the current work, the phrase *quiet ego* is used in a broad and metaphorical sense, and not to refer to any psychometrically specified construct. However, Wayment and Bauer (2008), who first introduced the term, posit four prototypical qualities of a quiet ego: (a) detached awareness, (b) interdependence, (c) compassion, and (d) growth. Accordingly, the quiet ego is a self-perspective that sustains non-defensive self-awareness and constructive self-criticism, balances concerns for the self and others, views the self and others interdependently and with compassion, and values personal growth.

putable. A number of studies document that high self-esteem participants respond to mortality reminders in more defensive and potentially destructive ways than low self-esteem participants, displaying increased risk-taking, for instance, or increased ingroup bias and outgroup derogation (Baldwin & Wesley, 1996; Landau & Greenberg, 2006; McGregor, Gailliot, Vasquez, & Nash, 2007). In fact, these results echo the finding that people with high self-esteem respond to self-threats in particularly defensive and aggressive ways (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987). Such parallelism is not astonishing, if we conceive of death as the ultimate threat to the self. In keeping with the general theme that the pursuit of self-esteem can be costly (Crocker & Park, 2004), in the context of terror management too, a focus on asserting the self's unique value seems to be associated with mixed consequences. Could there be other ways for the self to exist that would allow for healthier, more constructive ways of dealing with death anxiety?

### Humility as an Existential Anxiety Buffer

The current research program set out to test the idea that a quiet ego, as exemplified by humility, can buffer death anxiety. A humble outlook, as we have seen, is characterized by a propensity for seeing the self in proper perspective against the bigger picture and by low levels of self-focus. These qualities cast humility as an effective source of existential comfort and protection. To start with, those who possess humility have a relatively less intrusive ego that is secure in its reality—the self, to the extent that it is possible, is a non-issue for them. It follows that threats to the self, including the prospect of death, should be less alarming for humble people. They should be less likely to overreact and resort to unsavory defenses to fend off the threat. Furthermore, humility entails a penchant for seeing the larger context and accurately and non-defensively appraising one's place in it. It would stand to reason that as a result humble people would be more at peace with the nature of existence, including the finiteness of every life. Given this interrelated set of reasons, humility is expected to shield death anxiety and obviate destructive modes of dealing with the knowledge of one's mortality.

### Overview of Studies

Against this theoretical background, five studies tested the hypothesis that humility will buffer death anxiety and render defenses aimed at defying death anxiety less likely. Studies 1–3 examined how trait humility and a sense of entitlement moderate reactions to mortality reminders. Study 4 directly assessed the impact of a humility manipulation on death anxiety and compared it to the impact of a pride manipulation. Finally, Study 5 tested the prediction that an experimentally induced humility mindset would thwart the depleting effects of mortality salience (MS) on self-control. As a whole, these studies lie at the intersection of self and identity, TMT, and positive psychology literatures. The intended goal is to contribute to all three, by showing that the character strength of humility—possessing a quiet ego capable of seeing the self and life in proper perspective—can soothe death anxiety and hinder potentially harmful behavior.

## Study 1

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that humility as an individual difference variable would buffer death anxiety. Participants indicated the extent to which they possess humility and were then exposed to an MS manipulation. The dependent variable was moral disengagement, referring to a proclivity to endorse ethically problematic self-serving behaviors. Previous research has established that mortality concerns fuel endorsement of morally questionable behaviors that serve to defend or bolster the components of one's existential anxiety buffer (Kesebir, Chiu, & Pyszczynski, 2013). If humble people have a less needy ego that is more accepting of its limitations, then reminders of the fragility of life and the self should not elicit defensive reactions from them. It was thus hypothesized that individuals higher in possession of humility would not display increased moral disengagement in the face of mortality thoughts.

### Method

Eighty-eight American participants (34 males, 54 females) with a mean age of 33.73 years ( $SD = 11.46$ ) were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk and completed a short online survey in exchange for 60 cents.

At the beginning of the survey, participants were given 40 virtue words (taken from Kesebir & Kesebir, 2012) and asked to rate how much they possess each. Specifically, the instructions read: "In this task we want you to indicate how much you think you possess the following virtues. Please give spontaneous answers in this task. We are not here to judge you; we are only interested in your honest opinions of yourself." Scattered among the other virtue words were two words intended to capture humility: *humility* and *humbleness*. Participants indicated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 7 (*just like me*), how much they thought they possessed these virtues. Internal reliability for the two items was satisfactory ( $r = .67$ ).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to an MS or control condition. They were asked to come up with three Internet links to pictures of either a death-related ("graveyard") or neutral ("mug") concept, using the following instructions: "For the next task, you will be given a word and then asked to come up with three Internet links to pictures that depict the contents of this word. You can use any web search engine (e.g., Google, Yahoo, Bing) of your choice. You can choose any picture, as long as it accurately depicts what is asked from you." In the next step, participants assigned to the MS condition were told: "Please enter in the textbox below three separate web addresses, at which we can see pictures of a GRAVEYARD." In the control condition, GRAVEYARD was replaced with MUG. The MS manipulation was succeeded by the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and an anagram puzzle. These were meant to provide distraction and delay: Previous TMT research has consistently shown distal death defenses to occur more robustly after some distraction (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

The dependent variable was assessed with Moral Disengagement Scale (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012), which consists of eight items that measure an individual's inclination to morally disengage. Participants rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) their agreement with

some ethically problematic statements. Six of these eight statements inquired about behaviors that represent attempts at defending or bolstering the components of one's existential anxiety buffer. These items referred to previously well-established (e.g., Hirschberger, 2006; Landau et al., 2004; Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003; Pyszczynski et al., 2004) ingredients of the existential anxiety buffer, such as self-esteem ("Considering the ways people grossly misrepresent themselves, it's hardly a sin to inflate your own credentials"), relationships with close others ("It is okay to spread rumors to defend those you care about"), just world beliefs ("People who get mistreated have usually done something to bring it on themselves"), and respect for authority ("People shouldn't be held accountable for doing questionable things when they were just doing what an authority figure told them to do"). It was thus expected that MS would lead to higher endorsement of these items. For two items on the Moral Disengagement Scale ("Taking something without the owner's permission is okay as long as you're just borrowing it"; "Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt"), there were no theoretical grounds to expect that death thoughts would increase their endorsement. These two items were therefore not included in the data analysis.

Finally, participants completed the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR). Self-presentational concerns could affect participants' reports of moral disengagement and the analysis aimed to statistically control for this. The 40-item BIDR consists of two subscales, Self-Deceptive Enhancement and Impression Management (Paulhus, 1988). Self-deceptive enhancement reflects an unintentional tendency to portray oneself in a favorable light, whereas impression management involves intentional distortion to portray oneself favorably to others. On a scale ranging from 1 (*not true*) to 7 (*very true*), participants indicated their agreement with statements such as "I never regret my decisions" (self-deceptive enhancement;  $\alpha = .72$ ) and "When I hear people talking privately, I avoid listening" (impression management;  $\alpha = .83$ ).

## Results and Discussion

Participant ratings for how much they possess the virtues of humility ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) and humbleness ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) were averaged to create a composite score for humility ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). Neither self-deceptive enhancement ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) nor impression management ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) correlated significantly with self-reported humility ( $ps > .10$ ).

Participants' positive and negative affect did not differ as a function of having been assigned to the MS or control group ( $ps > .56$ ). As noted above, on the basis of theory, only six out of the eight items in the Moral Disengagement Scale were predicted to be affected by death anxiety; hence, a composite moral disengagement score was created from these six items ( $\alpha = .77$ ;  $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ).<sup>2</sup>

To test the hypothesis that humility will buffer against moral disengagement in the face of MS, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted on moral disengagement scores. Humility scores (mean-centered) and condition (coded:  $-1 =$  control condition,  $1 =$  MS) were entered simultaneously in a first step, followed by the two-way interaction in the second step (Aiken & West, 1991). The analysis yielded no main effect for humility,  $\beta = -.12$ ,

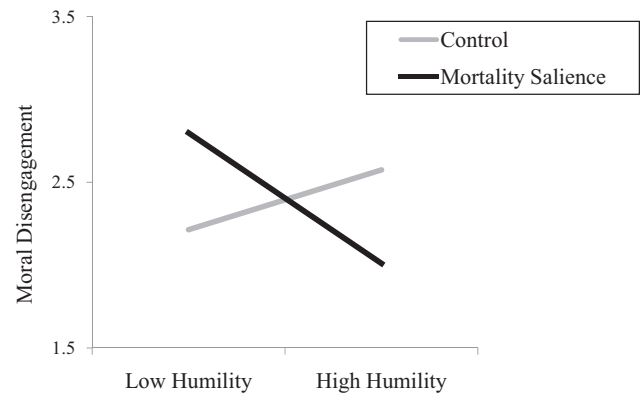


Figure 1. Moral disengagement as a function of mortality salience and humility.

$t(84) = -1.15$ ,  $p = .25$ , or condition,  $\beta = .006$ ,  $t(84) = 0.05$ ,  $p = .96$ . However, there was the predicted Humility  $\times$  Condition interaction,  $\beta = -.32$ ,  $t(84) = -3.09$ ,  $p = .003$  (see Figure 1). Subsequent simple slope analyses demonstrated that for those low in humility ( $-1$  standard deviation), mortality reminders significantly increased moral disengagement ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $t = 2.22$ ,  $p = .029$ ). For those high in humility ( $+1$  standard deviation), on the other hand, mortality thoughts significantly decreased moral disengagement ( $\beta = -.32$ ,  $t = -2.17$ ,  $p = .033$ ). To put it another way, in the control condition, humility was not associated with moral disengagement,  $r(42) = .20$ ,  $p = .20$ . Yet in the MS condition, humility and moral disengagement were significantly negatively associated,  $r(42) = -.44$ ,  $p = .003$ .

A final analysis factored in the role of self-deceptive and self-presentational concerns in responding. Self-deceptive enhancement did not predict moral disengagement,  $F(1, 86) = 0.85$ ,  $p = .36$ , whereas impression management strongly did,  $F(1, 86) = 13.21$ ,  $p < .001$ . As a result, only the Impression Management subscale of the BIDR was used in the subsequent analysis as a covariate. An analysis of covariance revealed that the Condition  $\times$  Humility interaction effect was still significant after controlling for impression management,  $F(1, 83) = 11.31$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ .

The results of Study 1 supported the hypothesized role of humility in buffering death anxiety. Whereas people low in self-reported humility responded to death reminders with increased willingness to morally disengage in the service of their existential anxiety buffer, people high in humility did not resort to this defense. Quite the opposite, they became less likely to morally disengage in the presence of death thoughts. Humility thus was associated not only with an absence of terror management defenses, but with a veritable shift of MS responses into a more desirable direction. One possible explanation is that humble people, having better insulation against death fear, get to experience mortality thoughts as a perspective provider—a reminder of what life is and how it should be lived. As a consequence, death makes

<sup>2</sup> Creating a composite score for the full eight-item Moral Disengagement Scale and submitting it to the same analysis as the six-item scale revealed a similarly significant interaction effect,  $\beta = -.30$ ,  $t(84) = -2.89$ ,  $p = .005$ .

them want to live up to universal standards of value and behave in morally worthy ways, bringing out the best in them.

## Study 2

Study 1 provided initial evidence that humility is linked to greater protection from death anxiety. The purpose of Study 2 was to conceptually replicate this finding and rule out the possibility that the effect could be explained by personality traits potentially related to humility. Specifically, the study aimed to establish that the known existential anxiety buffers of self-esteem (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997), secure attachment (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000), and mindfulness (Niemic et al., 2010) were not responsible for the observed buffering role of humility. A final consideration was to ascertain that it was not overall virtuousness, or a general prosocial orientation, that shielded from death anxiety, but specifically humility. With these intentions, Study 2 first assessed participants' humility, self-esteem, secure attachment, mindfulness, and general virtuousness and then exposed them to an MS manipulation. The dependent variable was fear of death—an explicit measure of existential anxiety. It was hypothesized that MS would increase fear of death only for those low, but not for those high, in humility. This effect was expected to hold even after controlling for self-esteem, secure attachment, mindfulness, and general virtuousness.

## Method

Participants were 142 Americans (58 males, 82 females, two unknown) with a mean age of 37.73 years ( $SD = 12.33$ ), who were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid 75 cents for their work. After providing demographic information about themselves at the beginning of the questionnaire, they completed the following measures in a counterbalanced order.

**Humility.** Humility was assessed in the same manner as in Study 1. To disguise the true purpose of the study, participants were given 15 words describing various virtues, scattered among which were *humility* and *humbleness*. On a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 7 (*just like me*), participants indicated how much they thought they possessed each of these virtues. Internal reliability for the two items was identical to that found in the previous study ( $r = .67$ ).

**Self-esteem.** The widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale assessed how positively or negatively participants regard their own worth (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) their agreement with statements such as “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others” ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Secure attachment.** Quality of adult attachment was measured with the 36-item Experience of Close Relationships Scale (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The scale separately captures the avoidance and anxiety dimensions of attachment. Participants responded to 18 items appraising avoidant attachment (e.g., “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close”) and 18 items appraising anxious attachment (e.g., “I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner”). Responses were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Internal reliability for both the avoidance ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and anxiety ( $\alpha = .94$ ) dimensions was excellent.

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness refers to a state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present (K. W. Brown & Ryan, 2003). People differ in trait mindfulness—their ability or willingness to sustain attention on the present. In the current study, trait mindfulness was evaluated with the 15-item Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (K. W. Brown & Ryan, 2003). On a 7-point scale, participants indicated their agreement with items such as “I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present” and “I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.” Responses were coded such that higher scores indicated higher trait mindfulness ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Virtuousness.** Participants' degree of humility was assessed with two virtue words (*humility* and *humbleness*) embedded within a list of 15 virtues. To capture participants' general level of virtue, an index was created using the 13 remaining virtue words in this list after excluding *humility* and *humbleness*. On a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 7 (*just like me*), participants thus rated how much they thought they possessed the virtues of *honesty*, *patience*, *compassion*, *integrity*, *honor*, *loyalty*, *kindness*, *sincerity*, *trustworthiness*, *courage*, *forgiveness*, *generosity*, and *wisdom* ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

After completing these measures, participants were randomly assigned to an MS or control condition. As in Study 1, participants in the MS condition were asked to come up with three Internet links to pictures that depict a “graveyard.” Participants in the control condition, on the other hand, were instructed to come up with three Internet links to pictures of a “pen.” The manipulation was followed by PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) and an anagram task meant to distract and delay.

Finally, the dependent measure, fear of death, was captured with the Your Own Death subscale of the Collett–Lester Fear of Death Scale (Lester, & Abdel-Khalek, 2003). Participants indicated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) how much they fear different aspects of their personal death such as “never thinking or experiencing anything again” or “the disintegration of your body after you die.” The subscale consists of seven items; however, in light of the age range and distribution of the current sample, with about 40% of participants being above the age of 40, the item “dying young” was dropped.<sup>3</sup> Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the remaining six items was .91.

## Results and Discussion

As in Study 1, participant ratings for how much they possess the virtues humility ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and humbleness ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) were averaged to create a composite humility score. Composite scores were also created for the variables of self-esteem, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, mindfulness, and virtue. Please refer to Table 1 for descriptive statistics and intercorrelations. Analyses confirmed that being in the MS or control condition was not associated with differential positive or negative affect ( $ps > .28$ ).

To test the hypothesis that humility will buffer the anxiety following mortality reminders, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted on death fear scores ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). Humility scores (mean-centered) and condition (coded:  $-1 =$

<sup>3</sup> Analyses including this item still yielded a significant Humility  $\times$  Condition interaction,  $\beta = -.20$ ,  $t(138) = -2.39$ ,  $p = .018$ .

control condition, 1 = MS) were entered simultaneously in a first step, followed by the two-way interaction in the second step. The analysis yielded no main effect for humility,  $\beta = .08$ ,  $t(138) = 0.93$ ,  $p = .35$ , or condition,  $\beta < .001$ ,  $t(138) = 0.004$ ,  $p = .997$ . Yet, as expected, the Humility  $\times$  Condition interaction was significant,  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $t(138) = -2.63$ ,  $p = .009$  (see Figure 2). Simple slope analyses to decompose the interaction revealed that for those low in humility ( $-1$  standard deviation), mortality reminders marginally increased death fear ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $t = 1.86$ ,  $p = .065$ ), whereas for those high in humility ( $+1$  standard deviation), they marginally decreased it ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $t = -1.89$ ,  $p = .061$ ). Probing the interaction using the Johnson–Neyman technique (A. F. Hayes, 2013) allowed to pinpoint the standardized values of humility in the data set at which MS started to increase and decrease fear of death significantly: For participants 1.35 standard deviation below the mean in humility, mortality thoughts significantly increased fear of death, whereas for those 1.31 standard deviation above the mean they significantly decreased it.

To rule out the hypothesis that some other construct related to humility was responsible for the observed effects, an analysis of covariance was conducted. The model included MS, humility, and the Humility  $\times$  Condition interaction. Additionally, self-esteem, mindfulness, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and virtuousness were entered as covariates (all mean-centered), after verifying that they fulfilled the homogeneity of regression slopes assumption. From the five covariates, anxious attachment significantly predicted death fear,  $F(1, 133) = 29.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , and avoidant attachment marginally predicted it,  $F(1, 133) = 3.68$ ,  $p = .057$ . Self-esteem, mindfulness, and general virtue did not exert any main effect on death fear ( $ps > .62$ ). Most importantly, the Humility  $\times$  Condition interaction emerged as significant from this analysis,  $F(1, 133) = 13.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . Indeed, the effect was stronger ( $\eta^2 = .08$ ), compared to a model that did not include the covariates ( $\eta^2 = .05$ ).

The current study provided additional evidence for the existential anxiety buffering function of humility by demonstrating that MS increases death fear only for those who are low in humility. In contrast, for participants high in humility, thinking about one’s mortality was associated with lower death fear. Thus, as in Study 1, when humility was combined with mortality thoughts, it not only failed to increase reactive responses, but effectively reduced them. Study 2 furthermore revealed the unique predictive power of humility over the constructs of self-esteem, secure attachment, mindfulness, and general virtuousness. After controlling for these variables, humility still moderated the effect of mortality reminders on death fear.

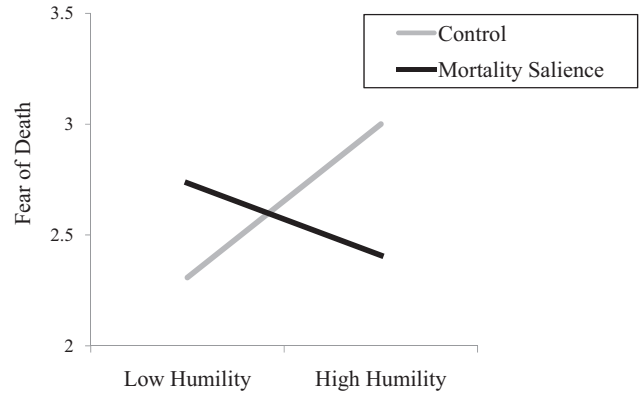


Figure 2. Fear of death as a function of mortality salience and humility.

### Study 3

To provide further support for the hypothesis that humility shields against death anxiety, Study 3 focused on a variable representing the absence of humility—a sense of entitlement. Psychological entitlement is a key component of narcissism, and is defined as “a stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others” (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004, p. 31). Entitlement is negatively related to humility, especially to certain operationalizations of it (Rowatt et al., 2006). In stark contrast to humble people, entitled people are deeply preoccupied with their own needs and convinced that they deserve special treatment. Entitlement has also been shown to predict a number of undesirable outcomes such as greedy intentions in a commons dilemma, selfish approaches to romantic relationships, and higher aggression following ego threat (Campbell et al., 2004). If entitlement, with its relentless focus on the self and its lack of concern for other people’s rights and needs, embodies the “noisy ego,” then it should be associated with heightened defensive reactions to mortality thoughts.

The dependent variable for the study was chosen as cultural worldview defense, operationalized as anti-Islam prejudice. TMT research has shown repeatedly that reminders of death increase discrimination, hostility, and aggression toward those who do not share one’s cultural worldview (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1994; McGregor et al., 1998; Pyszczynski, Abdollahi, Solomon, Greenberg, & Weise, 2006), including those who do not share one’s religion (Greenberg et al., 1990). In light of the hypothesized protective function of the quiet ego, it was predicted that those

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for the Trait Measures in Study 2

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Humility	5.23	1.18	—	.08	-.001	-.18*	.12	.51**
2. Self-esteem	3.20	0.61		—	-.55**	-.49**	.54**	.46**
3. Anxious attachment	3.16	1.29			—	.36**	-.43**	-.34**
4. Avoidant attachment	2.69	1.26				—	-.46**	-.48**
5. Mindfulness	4.72	1.13					—	.41**
6. Virtuousness	5.73	0.73						—

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

with a low sense of entitlement would not respond to MS with increased worldview defense in the form of anti-Islam prejudice.

## Method

Seventy-eight American participants (40 males, 38 females; mean age = 34.94 years,  $SD = 15.11$ ) were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk to complete a short survey and received 45 cents in return.

Participants first completed the nine-item Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004). They rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) their agreement with items such as "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others" and "I feel entitled to more of everything" ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Next, they were randomly assigned to an MS or control condition. Those in the MS condition responded to the question "Please write two sentences about what you feel when you think about the fact that you will die someday," while those in the control condition responded to "Please write two sentences about what you feel when you think about experiencing intense pain during a visit to the dentist." As in the previous two studies, the MS manipulation was followed by PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) and an anagram task, intended to delay and distract.

The dependent variable, anti-Islam prejudice, was captured with a six-item measure. On a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), participants indicated their agreement with statements about Islam and Muslims ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Adapted from Imhoff and Recker (2012), sample items included "Compared to other religious and philosophical approaches Islam is rather primitive," "Any critique of the West brought forward by representatives of Islam is exaggerated and unjustified," and "Hostility against Muslims is an intolerable form of discrimination" (reverse-coded). Finally, participants provided some demographic information about themselves.<sup>4</sup>

## Results and Discussion

Participant responses to the Psychological Entitlement Scale and the Anti-Islam Prejudice measure were averaged to create composite scores of entitlement ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and anti-Islam prejudice ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). Entitlement was significantly related to age, with younger people reporting higher entitlement,  $r(75) = -.23$ ,  $p = .042$ . There was also a non-significant trend for men to feel more entitled,  $t(75) = 1.60$ ,  $p = .115$ . Anti-Islam prejudice, on the other hand, was not predicted by age or sex ( $ps > .15$ ). Negative or positive affect did not differ as a function of experimental condition either ( $ps > .45$ ).

To test the hypothesis that a low sense of entitlement would buffer against cultural worldview defense in the face of death thoughts, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted on anti-Islam prejudice. Entitlement scores (mean-centered) and condition (coded:  $-1 =$  control condition,  $1 =$  MS) were entered in a first step, followed by the two-way interaction in the second step. The analysis yielded no main effect for condition,  $\beta = -.06$ ,  $t(73) = -0.50$ ,  $p = .62$ . Entitlement was not significantly associated with anti-Islam prejudice either,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $t(73) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .17$ . There was, however, the hypothesized Condition  $\times$  Entitlement interaction,  $\beta = .33$ ,  $t(73) = 3.01$ ,  $p = .004$  (see Figure 3). Probing the interaction revealed that for those high in entitlement

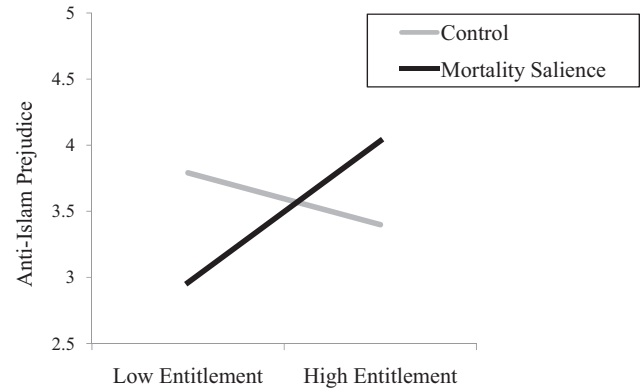


Figure 3. Anti-Islam prejudice as a function of mortality salience and entitlement.

(+1 standard deviation on the Psychological Entitlement Scale), reminders of mortality marginally increased anti-Islam prejudice,  $\beta = .28$ ,  $t = 1.80$ ,  $p = .077$ . For those low in entitlement ( $-1$  standard deviation), on the other hand, mortality thoughts significantly decreased anti-Islam prejudice,  $\beta = -.39$ ,  $t = -2.47$ ,  $p = .016$ . Looked at differently, entitlement did not predict anti-Islam prejudice in the control condition,  $\beta = -.17$ ,  $t(36) = -1.06$ ,  $p = .30$ . Yet in the MS condition, a higher sense of entitlement significantly and strongly predicted higher anti-Islam prejudice,  $\beta = .49$ ,  $t(37) = 3.39$ ,  $p = .002$ .

These findings lend support to the hypothesis that a low sense of entitlement protects against death anxiety. Exposed to mortality thoughts, those high in entitlement tended to feel more prejudice toward Islam, presumably in an attempt to ward off death anxiety by asserting the superiority of their own worldview. Those low in entitlement, on the other hand, not only did not exhibit such defensive reactions, but went the opposite route and became significantly less prejudiced. Thus, as in Studies 1 and 2, when a quiet ego was combined with mortality thoughts, it brought out arguably more desirable behaviors. These results, taken together, suggest that a quiet ego not only shields death anxiety but also drives those who possess it toward less defensive and more tolerant modes of coping. In other words, humility appears to be not only a buffer, but also a source of perspective and insight in the face of death anxiety.

## Study 4

Using an individual differences approach, the first three studies demonstrated that higher levels of self-reported humility and lower levels of self-reported psychological entitlement predict lower anxiety and defensiveness in response to mortality thoughts. Although these findings were promisingly consistent with the idea that a quiet ego quiets death anxiety, Study 4

<sup>4</sup> The demographic items, regrettably, did not inquire about participants' religious affiliation, which would have allowed us to rule out the presence of Muslim participants in the sample. The rate of Muslims in the general American population, as well as observed in previous Mechanical Turk samples, is less than 1%, however, rendering it unlikely that this limitation would threaten the validity of the results in a significant way.

employed a more direct test of this hypothesis. Specifically, participants were primed with humility and then asked to report their fear of death. If humility indeed protects against death anxiety, a straightforward prediction would be that participants primed with humility would experience lower death anxiety than participants in a neutral condition. In addition to a neutral condition, the design adopted a pride priming condition. Pride predicts self-esteem better than any other emotion (J. D. Brown & Marshall, 2001) and has oftentimes been contrasted with humility (e.g., Comte-Sponville, 2001; Sandage & Moe, 2011). Pride is predicated on attributions of value and importance to the self, and these attributions, while boosting the ego and granting some armor against anxiety, could simultaneously make threats to the self more disturbing—for the more valuable and important the self is perceived to be, the more unbearable a fate death should become. It was hence hypothesized that humility would prove a more effective soother of death anxiety than pride.

## Method

One hundred sixty-five participants (88 males, 77 females) were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk and participated in the study in exchange for 40 cents (mean age = 32.18 years,  $SD = 12.98$ ). At the beginning of the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: humility, pride, or baseline. In the humility and pride conditions, they were told that they would be asked to write about some personal experiences. In the humility condition, the instructions read: "Please write about a time in your life when you felt humility. How did you feel and what did you think?" Owing to the fact that humility at times tends to be confused with humiliation (Exline & Geyer, 2004), which is a construct deeply different from the quiet ego, participants were expressly warned: "Note that we do NOT want you to write about a 'humiliating' incident, one that made you feel ashamed, guilty, or foolish. Rather, we are interested in experiences that provided you with a down-to-earth perspective of yourself in relation to all other beings." In the pride condition, on the other hand, participants were asked: "Please write about a time in your life when you felt pride. How did you feel and what did you think?" Finally, participants in the baseline condition skipped this part of the survey. Next, all participants completed the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) to ensure that the experimental conditions did not elicit differential moods.

The dependent variable was death anxiety, which was assessed with the 12-item Death Anxiety Scale (Templer, 1970). On a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), participants reported their agreement with statements such as "I am very much afraid to die," "I often think about how short life really is," and "The thought of death never bothers me" (reverse-coded). The scale had very good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

## Results and Discussion

Even though participants were explicitly instructed not to report instances of humiliation in the humility condition, an initial inspection of the open-ended responses revealed a good number of participants who wrote about personal humiliation or embarrassment (e.g., "I felt humiliation when I lost my job for no reason"; "When I got pregnant I felt guilty because I felt like I let down my

parents"; "I felt humiliated when I had to do a lip-sync in front of my whole high school. Our routine was not very good and a lot of people laughed at us"). Hence, prior to data analysis, all responses to the humility condition were reviewed and those with content clearly not about a quiet ego were excluded from further analysis ( $n = 14$ ).<sup>5</sup>

Composite death anxiety scores were created by averaging participant ratings on the Death Anxiety Scale ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). Age was not related to death anxiety ( $p = .34$ ); however, gender was,  $t(149) = -2.51$ ,  $p = .013$ . Women reported higher death anxiety ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) in comparison to men ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ). Analyses revealed that experimental condition did not significantly affect positive ( $p = .11$ ) or negative affect ( $p = .97$ ).

A one-way between-subjects analysis of variance was performed on death anxiety to examine the effect of experimental condition, which yielded a significant effect,  $F(2, 148) = 4.05$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . Supporting the hypotheses, planned contrasts demonstrated that participants in the humility condition reported significantly lower death anxiety ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) compared to both the pride condition ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $t(148) = -2.71$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $d = 0.55$ , and the baseline condition ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ),  $t(148) = -2.33$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $d = 0.47$  (see Figure 4).

These findings constitute particularly compelling evidence for the existentially protective nature of humility, by revealing a one-to-one relationship between a humble outlook and lower death anxiety. Relative to participants in both the baseline and pride conditions, those who remembered a humbling moment in their lives felt less anxious about death. The theme reverberating through participant accounts of humility was one of recognizing their own smallness ("Sometimes looking up at the stars or watching the sun rise really makes you feel small") or imperfection ("I kept insisting I was correct, but came to find out I was wrong all along"). Yet this realization was experienced not as distressing but comforting and even inspiring. Many of these memories also involved seeing one's life in perspective ("I got a good look at people's houses and the way they live, and that made me realize each one of those houses had a family in it just like mine, all trying to live and survive every day, just like mine"), especially in comparison to more difficult lives ("I visited a homeless shelter and it humbled me because I realized how much I really have"). The humility prime thus seemed to bring forth a self that is able to see itself and life more clearly for what it is, yet was at peace with this reality. The relative deproblematization of the self and the acceptance of its place in the grand scheme of things, as reflected in these accounts, was presumably responsible for rendering death less unsettling a fact for participants in the humility condition.

Notably, recalling moments of pride did not result in diminished death anxiety. Pride is an emotion geared toward enhancing and affirming the self, regardless of whether it is born authentically from achievement and mastery or embodies hubristic feelings of arrogance, grandiosity, and superiority (Tracy & Robins, 2007). The self takes the center stage in the phenomenology of pride,

<sup>5</sup> An analysis of variance that does not exclude these 14 responses still yielded a significant effect of experimental condition on death anxiety,  $F(2, 162) = 3.80$ ,  $p = .024$ , though the effect was weaker.



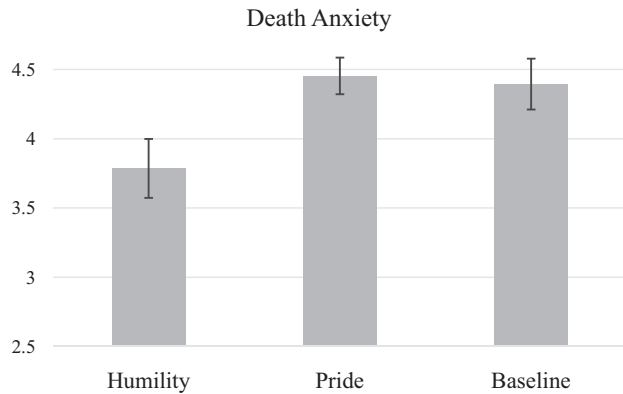


Figure 4. Death anxiety as a function of experimental condition. Error bars:  $\pm 1$  standard error.

which likely explains why it failed to effectively soothe death anxiety. For all the anxiety buffering potential it carries, a boost to the self also is capable of making the assured finiteness of the self a proportionately more dreadful prospect. Study 4 thus demonstrated that a quiet ego offers protection from death anxiety and does it better than a swollen ego.

### Study 5

This final study manipulated both mortality thoughts and a humility mindset to assess the existentially protective function of humility on self-control. Self-control—the ability of the self to override one response to substitute a more adaptive alternative—is a particularly important outcome variable. It is a key to success in various life domains, and failures at it are associated with a plethora of problems, from violence and crime to addiction, from unwanted pregnancies to obesity (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). Previous research has established a reciprocal relationship between death anxiety and self-control: Both trait and state self-control are associated with more effective management of death anxiety, whereas coping with death thoughts depletes self-control (Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Baumeister, 2006). It has also been demonstrated that MS intensifies the desire to avoid self-awareness (Arndt, Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998). This desire oftentimes translates into increased temptation for escapist behaviors such as eating junk food, drinking alcohol, or shopping, which might represent self-regulatory failure. If humble self-views mollify death anxiety, then mortality thoughts should not lead to depleted self-control and increased temptation among participants primed with humility. Employing a 2 (humility vs. control)  $\times$  2 (MS vs. control) factorial design, the current study tested this hypothesis.

### Method

Participants were 197 Americans (127 males, 70 females) with a mean age of 29.16 years ( $SD = 9.11$ ), who were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk marketplace and paid 55 cents for their work. At the beginning of the survey, participants provided demographic information about themselves, after which they were exposed to a humility or control condition. As in Study 4, those in

the humility condition were instructed to write about a time in their life when they felt humility. They were also warned to write about an incident that provided them with a down-to-earth perspective of themselves and not about a humiliating, embarrassing, or shameful one. This warning was underlined this time, to make it more conspicuous. Those in the control condition, on the other hand, were asked to write about a time in their lives when they felt *humidity*. Specifically, the instructions read: "Please write about a time in your life when you felt humidity (in the air). How did you feel and what did you think?" Humidity was deemed suitable as a control condition because it is a weather phenomenon with potentially no power to psychologically impact participants in a meaningful way.<sup>6</sup>

Immediately following the humility manipulation, participants were assigned to either an MS or control condition. Parallel to the MS manipulation in Studies 1 and 2, they were asked to come up with three web addresses that depict a graveyard (in the MS condition) or a pen (control condition). The MS manipulation was followed by PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) and a word generation task ("Write down in the boxes below the first five words that come to your mind that start with the letter T"), meant to provide delay and distraction.

The dependent variable, self-control, was assessed with a measure of felt temptation. Drawn largely from Tsukayama, Duckworth, and Kim (2012), a Temptation Scale was created for the purposes of the current study. Participants were presented with eight activities that imply low levels of self-control. These activities were *putting off work that needs to get done, purchasing things, procrastinating, drinking beer, doing nothing, eating fried food, spending rather than saving your money, and getting drunk*. The instructions read: "Please indicate on the following scale how tempted you would be to do the following activities RIGHT NOW, if there were no long-term consequences for yourself or anyone else. That is, how attracted do you feel to these activities right now regardless of how harmful you might think they are?" Participants were prompted to be as spontaneous and honest in their responses as they could, with the preface that "we are here not to judge you, but to understand human behavior." They indicated their responses on a scale from 1 (*not tempted at all*) to 5 (*very tempted*). The Temptation Scale displayed acceptable internal reliability ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

### Results and Discussion

As in the previous study, an inspection of the open-ended responses given in the humility condition revealed that some participants wrote about shame, failure, or humiliation experiences instead of humility. These participants ( $n = 5$ ) were excluded from further data analyses.<sup>7</sup> The remaining participants' responses to the Temptation Scale were averaged to elicit an overall score of temptation ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ). Temptation was not associated with positive affect, negative affect, or sex (all  $ps > .80$ ). There

<sup>6</sup> This control condition was admittedly inspired by Yogi Berra's slip-up, "It ain't the heat, it's the humidity."

<sup>7</sup> Analyses showed that including these participants' data would not have changed the statistical significance of the predicted Humility  $\times$  MS Condition interaction,  $F(1, 193) = 8.19$ ,  $p = .005$ .

was a non-significant trend for a negative association between age and self-reported temptation,  $r(190) = -.12, p = .098$ .

Temptation scores were submitted to a 2 (humility condition: humility vs. control)  $\times$  2 (MS condition: MS vs. control) between-subjects analysis of variance. The analysis yielded no main effect of the humility manipulation on temptation,  $F(1, 188) = 1.06, p = .31$ . Nor was a main effect observed for the MS manipulation,  $F(1, 188) = 0.11, p = .74$ . The predicted Humility  $\times$  MS Condition interaction, however, was significant,  $F(1, 188) = 7.20, p = .008, \eta^2 = .04$ . How mortality reminders affected participants' felt temptation thus depended on whether they were exposed to a humility prime. Consistent with previous research on the deleterious effects of MS on self-control (Gailliot et al., 2006), MS amplified felt temptation when not accompanied by the humility prime,  $F(1, 188) = 5.16, p = .024, \eta^2 = .03$ . Yet when humility thoughts preceded mortality reminders, this effect was eliminated and furthermore replaced by a trend in the opposite direction: MS tended to make participants less likely to feel temptation in the presence of humility thoughts,  $F(1, 188) = 2.47, p = .118, \eta^2 = .013$  (see Figure 5).

Once again, an experimentally induced quiet ego led to more desirable psychological outcomes in the face of mortality reminders. Participants in the humility condition did not experience impaired self-control when prompted to think about personal mortality, and they even displayed a potential for improved self-control. This last finding, albeit not reaching significance, echoed the results from Studies 1, 2, and 3, in which trait humility combined with mortality thoughts generated a shift in the less reactive, less defensive, less unsavory direction.

The current study can also be thought of as a test of the hypoegoic self-regulation idea, according to which diminishing the self's involvement in the self-regulation process can yield better results, as self-thoughts often interfere with the ability to regulate, proving ineffective or even counterproductive (Leary, Adams, & Tate, 2006; Leary & Guadagno, 2011). Humility is a hypoegoic state by definition, and the protective role it played under the normally depleting MS condition attests to the merits of the hypoegoic self-regulation concept, particularly in contexts when the self is under threat.

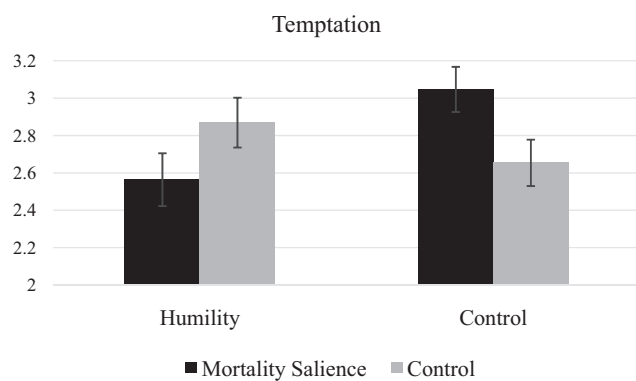


Figure 5. Temptation as a function of humility and mortality salience. Error bars:  $\pm 1$  standard error.

## General Discussion

Five studies tested and found support for the hypothesis that a quiet, humble ego buffers death anxiety. The first three studies showed that high self-reported humility and low psychological entitlement were associated with lower death anxiety (Study 2) and lower death anxiety-induced defensiveness—in the form of self-serving moral disengagement (Study 1) or cultural worldview defense (Study 3). It was also established in Study 2 that humility wards off death anxiety above and beyond the potentially related constructs of self-esteem, secure attachment, mindfulness, and general virtuousness. Study 4 provided direct evidence for the existentially soothing role of humility, by documenting that an experimentally induced humility mindset decreases self-reported death anxiety. Finally, Study 5 demonstrated that activating humble self-views can prevent mortality thoughts from draining self-control. The results were consistent across different operationalizations of the quiet ego and across different dependent variables, providing converging evidence for the a-quiet-ego-quiets-death-anxiety hypothesis as a whole.

The picture of the humble self emerging from these studies is one that is naturally fortified against death anxiety. Humility involves seeing and accepting the truth about the self. In its most basic meaning, this implies knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, coming to terms with one's imperfections. As a result, the humble self is relatively protected from the need for self-serving distortions and defensive reactions to self-threats. On a deeper level though, humility also involves accurately judging the self's place within the larger context of existence. The humble person is thus probably more aware and accepting of the fact that against a cosmic scale of time and space, every human being is minute. This should turn personal mortality into a somewhat lesser tragedy and, potentially, into a source of clarity and guidance as to how life should be lived.

In the present work, memories of pride failed to reduce death anxiety, whereas memories of humility successfully did. This was a direct test of the comparative merits of humility and self-affirmation as soothers of death anxiety. Affirming the self has traditionally been regarded as a main vehicle to cope with self-threat in social psychology (e.g., Steele, 1988). Terror management literature too, from its inception, has focused on self-esteem and faith in cultural worldviews—representing affirming “me” and “mine”—as the primary existential anxiety buffers. Yet as noted, relying so heavily on the self as a value base comes with certain costs; and scholars recently started to point to self-transcendence as a potentially sturdier bulwark against self-threats than self-enhancement (Burson, Crocker, & Mischkowski, 2012; Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008; Kesebir et al., 2013). Humility, with its minimized focus on the self and its affinity for seeing the self and life within a grander context, substantially overlaps with self-transcendence. The current work echoes the same sentiment that in the face of self-threats, transcending the self can be more conducive to personally and socially desirable outcomes than enhancing the self. In the case of death, this is probably especially true—not only should self-affirmation be of limited value against a threat as formidable as death, but boosting the ego would simultaneously boost life's value, rendering mortality a more terrifying prospect.

It is worth considering, in light of the present findings, the relationship between humility and self-esteem and their respective roles in terror management processes. Writings on humility repeatedly make the point that it is the secure who are humble, that no ego paradoxically is strong ego. Genuine humility, characterized by being able to acknowledge one's limitations and not needing to resort to defensiveness under ego threat, indeed connotes a firmly grounded sense of self-worth. Humility and self-esteem would overlap then, to the extent that self-esteem reflects authentic, securely rooted feelings of self-worth, and not a fragile self's overinflated pretenses at self-value. In that sense, humility should be more strongly associated with implicit self-esteem—a global evaluation of the self that is less filtered, less susceptible to self-serving biases and impression management attempts—than with explicit self-esteem. Research finds that implicit self-esteem in general confers protection from ego threats (e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; McGregor & Jordan, 2007); and in the case of death threats, the anxiety-buffering capacity of self-esteem has been shown to stem more from implicit than explicit self-esteem (Schmeichel et al., 2009). Though humility encompasses more than high implicit self-esteem (i.e., implicit self-esteem probably is a necessary but not sufficient component of humility), the demonstrated protective function of humility reemphasizes the value of securely held feelings of self-worth in the face of ego threats.

Even though the present research program offered compelling evidence that humility buffers death anxiety, it did not identify the precise mechanisms through which this effect is occurring. What underlying processes are responsible for the mollifying effect of humility? Which psychological ingredients make the quiet ego a unique buffer, shielding death anxiety above and beyond other known buffers such as self-esteem or secure attachment? I have argued that key to the effects of humility are the interrelated qualities of self-transcendence, perspective and acceptance. Humble people likely see themselves from a higher, broader, truer perspective, and struggle less with accepting what they see. This possibly renders threats to the self less distressing and the reality of death easier to accept. Self-esteem, and other buffers that rely on boosting the value of “me and mine,” potentially work by making the self feel more powerful and less vulnerable in the face of death. Humility, on the other hand, might work not by making the self bigger but rather by making death smaller. These claims—that humility renders death less frightening, because the humble are better at seeing and accepting their own smallness and fragility—doubtlessly need to be subjected to further empirical scrutiny. Future research investigating the role of perspective/wisdom and acceptance in assuaging death anxiety would be particularly welcomed.

The finding that humility can serve as a source of strength in coping with death anxiety adds to a newly emerging body of research demonstrating the desirability of humility as a personality trait and revealing the humble ego as “an undervalued psychological stock” (Exline, 2008, p. 56). If seeing and accepting reality for what it is is indispensable to wisdom and if highest levels of self-development require a quieting of the ego and a transcending of the self (Ardelt, 2008), then humility is part and parcel of wisdom and maturity. Humility also is closely associated with virtues such as kindness, respectfulness, gratitude, and mercy. In light of all this, it is concerning that in the United States, the past several decades witnessed a shift toward radical individualism and

the glorification of a self-oriented worldview (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985; Myers, 2000; Putnam, 2000). This shift comes with a rise in phenomena such as narcissism, psychological entitlement, overcompetitiveness, appearance obsession, and attention seeking (Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009), denoting an overall decline of humility as a value. This decline is explicitly manifested in cultural products: A survey of a large corpus of American books documents an average drop of 44.33% in the appearance frequency of the words *humility* and *humbleness* from 1901 to 2000 (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2012). Religions traditionally encourage humility and self-transcendence, and the weakening influence of religion on the American public in the past decades (e.g., Chaves, 2011) might have contributed to this picture as well.

If humility buffers death anxiety, as the current work indicates, its waning cultural importance does not bode well for individual and societal well-being. Psychological dysfunction is considered to entail extreme, graceless, or inefficient ways of dealing with death anxiety (Becker, 1971, 1973; Yalom, 1980), and mismanagement of death anxiety has been empirically implicated in a number of psychological disorders including phobias, compulsive behavior, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Arndt, Routledge, Cox, & Goldenberg, 2005; Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2011; Strachan et al., 2007). Myriad unsavory or harmful behavior tendencies, such as prejudice, intergroup aggression, materialism, and self-regulatory failure, are also fueled by existential anxiety. The current work reveals that only a magnified sense of self brings out this dark side of existential anxiety, whereas a small, quiet, humble self, if anything, is associated with desirable behavior patterns in response to mortality thoughts. In admission to powerlessness against the bounds of one's reality seems to lie an ironic strength, which makes rediscovering humility as a virtue and cultivating it a worthy endeavor.

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Received March 19, 2013

Revision received December 30, 2013

Accepted January 7, 2014 ■