

On Modesty: Being Good and Knowing It Without Flaunting It

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Abstract

A surprising amount of disagreement exists in the philosophical literature over how modesty ought to be characterized, and indeed over whether it should even be counted among the virtues. It standardly appears in lists of the virtues, but serious challenges to its inclusion on such lists date back at least to Aristotle. Discussions of modesty have taken on particular importance in recent work on the virtues: one author has argued at length that modesty necessarily involves ignorance of one's abilities, accomplishments, and self-worth; and through this has issued a challenge to the long-held view that no virtue consists in, or is based upon, ignorance. This paper is an exploration of whether modesty ought to be considered a virtue. It highlights the good and bad features of a number of both historical and contemporary discussions of modesty. A competing account of modesty is developed and argued to be preferable to others that have been offered. On this account, modesty is situated among the virtues, and is described as an attitude characterized by reluctance – underpinned by appropriate normative reasons – to evaluate oneself in terms of abilities and accomplishments. This account appropriately defies recent attempts to understand the virtues and their importance entirely within a consequentialist framework.

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I. Introduction

Most people can easily call to mind a friend who is modest in the sense of the word that is roughly opposed to arrogant and synonymous with humble. This individual might be modest regarding her considerable intelligence and intellectual achievements, professional accomplishments, musical or artistic talents, physical strength, athleticism, physical attractiveness, wittiness, or even the extent to which she is virtuous—for example, how considerate, generous, brave, or courteous she is. The list could go on. It will be said as a shorthand that such a person is extremely good, and modest about this goodness.

Modesty in this sense is typically presumed to be a virtue. But a claim by – of all people – Sherlock Holmes has been taken to represent a philosophical challenge to the received view of modesty as a virtue. Holmes says, “My dear Watson... I cannot agree with those who rank modesty among the virtues. To the logician all things should be seen exactly as they are, and to underestimate one’s self is as much a departure from truth as to exaggerate one’s own powers.”¹

This paper is an attempt to respond to this challenge. A variety of discussions of modesty are considered: some are historical and some are contemporary; some maintain that modesty should not count as a virtue and some hold that it should. The view receiving the most attention here is the one espoused recently by Julia Driver, which maintains that modesty consists in ignorance – specifically, genuine underestimation – of one’s worth, abilities, or accomplishments.² Reflecting on the flaws in these discussions, as well as what they get right, an account of modesty is offered and defended that plausibly situates it among the virtues. Modesty is interesting in its own right, but it has taken on particular importance in recent

discussions of the virtues, largely because of the central role that Driver's analysis of modesty plays in her fundamental reconception of the virtues. If her claims about modesty fail, then some of the impetus is lost for the new and quite controversial consequentialist understanding of the virtues that she urges.

II. The Challenge

Holmes is not alone in doubting that modesty is a virtue. One suspicion that bears entertaining is that modesty was labeled a virtue by those who had some interest in keeping people subjugated. To teach people that modesty is a virtue is to teach them to divert credit for their skills and accomplishments away from themselves, so that when they demand their "just desert," the amount they take themselves to be justified in demanding (in terms of rights, money, influence, standard of living, etc.) will be less than if they took more credit. Perhaps they will even consider the very act of demanding their just desert to be immodest. Another suspicion is that those who disapprove of immodesty are simply letting their jealousy or resentment get the best of them. It is at least possible that one's disapproval of the immodesty of those who really are extremely good stems from one's resentment that they are better than one, and that it is the resentment, not the immodesty, that is morally suspect.

Aristotle, no less, refuses to characterize modesty as a virtue. His view is that "the good man alone is to be honored" and is justified in making claims about his own merit. He says:

The man who thinks himself worthy of less than he is really worthy of is unduly humble... Being worthy of good things, [he] robs himself of what he deserves, and seems to have something bad about him from the fact that he does not think himself worthy of good things, and seems also not to know himself; else he would have desired the things he was worthy of, since these were good. Yet such people are not thought to be fools, but unduly retiring. Such an estimate, however, seems actually to make them worse; for each

class of people aims at what corresponds to its worth, and these people stand back even from noble actions and undertakings, deeming themselves unworthy, and from external goods no less.³

Hume understands Montaigne as among those refusing to call modesty a virtue. Hume attributes to Montaigne the view that “one should say as frankly, I have sense, I have learning, I have courage, beauty, or wit; as it is sure we often think so.”⁴ But Hume disagrees, saying that were Montaigne’s advice heeded, it is obvious “that such a flood of impertinence would break in upon us, as would render society wholly intolerable.”⁵ For this reason, Hume says, it has become custom that people not praise themselves much except among intimate friends. For Hume, virtues are roughly qualities that are useful or agreeable to oneself and to others; and modesty, he suggests, is such a quality. He maintains that “in young men chiefly, [modesty] is a sure sign of good sense; and it is also the certain means of augmenting that endowment, by preserving their ears open to instruction, and making them still grasp after new attainments. But it has a further charm to every spectator; by flattering every man’s vanity, and presenting the appearance of a docile pupil, who receives, with proper attention and respect, every word they utter.”⁶

If Hume’s approach to characterizing modesty as a virtue sounds initially plausible, second thoughts may be generated by considering that there seems to be, on Hume’s view, reason for also classifying, say, the servility of the so-called Uncle Tom as a virtue.⁷ Servility is, after all, quite plausibly useful and agreeable both to the Uncle Tom and to the many racists around him. The servility is useful to the racists because it makes the Uncle Tom more easily exploited, and it is agreeable to the Uncle Tom himself because he lacks appropriate self-respect. What is troublesome, of course, is that what explains all of this – the racism that pervades this

community – is itself a form of moral depravity. There is good reason for saying servility ought not be useful or agreeable to oneself or others, and in turn for saying it ought not count as a virtue. The natural question is why modesty should not be treated in the same way.

III. Three Contemporary Accounts

Most contemporary philosophical discussions of modesty consider it to be a virtue, though considering how some of them describe modesty, it is difficult to see why. As indicated earlier, especially important is Julia Driver's provocative, though – as will be argued here – ultimately confused, analysis of modesty.⁸ Driver rightly rejects all behavioral accounts of modesty, which is to say, those that maintain that being modest is simply a matter of behaving or talking in certain ways and not others. We can clearly imagine someone who is reasonably considered to be immodest though this person does not speak or behave in an immodest way (perhaps because she has no opportunity to do so, or perhaps because she fears the bad consequences that may result from doing so). Driver concludes that modesty has importantly to do with one's attitude, one's way of thinking about or assessing oneself, and not just how one behaves.⁹

In wondering about the attitude underpinning modesty, and more specifically about how the modest person assesses her goodness, Driver is confronted by something of a dilemma. On the one hand, the modest person may have a quite accurate sense of her goodness. If this is so, then when she talks about herself in a modest-sounding way, she is seemingly saying things that she believes to be false. The modest person, so construed, is in all likelihood not actually trying to convince others that she is not so good, but rather is trying to convince others that she does not *take herself* to be so good. This is dishonest and manipulative. It is not modesty but false

modesty. On the other hand, the modest person may be unaware of how good she is. If this is so, then when she talks about herself in a modest-sounding way, she speaks with sincerity and does not knowingly say anything false. But in this case, being modest rests on what is intuitively a defect, namely ignorance—in this case, ignorance of one’s goodness.

Driver believes, reasonably enough, that “sincerity seems to be a necessary condition for genuine modesty.”¹⁰ The modest person must not be someone whose publicly expressed self-estimations have manipulative underpinnings. In order to continue counting modesty as a virtue, she opts for ignorance, giving and endorsing what she calls the underestimation account. According to Driver “for a person to be modest, she must be ignorant with regard to her own worth. She must think herself less deserving, or less worthy, than she really is.”¹¹ Driver claims, moreover, that in order to be modest, “it is not enough to be ignorant of self-worth; one also has to be disposed to be modest. A modest person would simply not believe that he was that good,”¹² even if others told him so. In an earlier work she said that “modesty can be characterized as a dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth,” though she has dropped this wording more recently.¹³ Driver claims it as a strength of her account that the modest person, ignorant of her goodness, does not realize that she is underestimating herself, and in turn will be ignorant even of the fact that she is modest. Any plausible account of modesty, she thinks, must make sense of the oddity of the statement “I am modest,” which she says is self-defeating. She says, “If I were to utter [it], charitable persons would think that I was joking. Others would think that I was being nonsensical.”¹⁴

There are at least three general reasons why the underestimation account is unsatisfying.

First, Driver takes herself to be directly challenging the longstanding view that “no virtue is constituted by, or based upon, ignorance,”¹⁵ but this view is not so easily shrugged off. There

are clearly traits – good-making traits, even – that are neither chosen nor learned. It would be a mistake to deny that a person can be “naturally” virtuous (including naturally modest) where this means just that a genetic disposition and early environmental influences have made the person apt to manifest the virtuous trait(s). Not everyone needs to work at being modest, and one is not less virtuous for not having had to struggle to be modest. But one should be able to think to oneself, more or less explicitly: “I am not as modest as I would like to be; I recognize that there are reasons for being more modest than I am, and so will set myself to becoming a more genuinely modest person.” However, it is difficult to see how the modest person could do this if modesty requires – as Driver maintains – ignorance both of how good one actually is and of the extent to which one is modest or immodest.

One may reply that there are ways to make oneself ignorant of certain sorts of facts, including facts about one’s goodness. A person might consciously avoid modes of inquiry in which she might learn more about how good she is. She might, for the sake of her own modesty, change the subject when people start evaluating her.¹⁶ Several points should be registered in response. First, while doing this kind of thing might keep her from learning more about her considerable goodness, it seems plain that it might instead prevent her from learning about ways in which she is not so good. This might thereby deprive her of a chance to lower her estimation of herself and thus seemingly contribute to her immodesty. Relatedly, it might make it less likely that she actually works at becoming better in whatever the relevant respect(s). Second, failing to learn more about how good one is does not amount, on Driver’s account, to becoming more modest than one currently is. Rather, it is (at best) a way of not becoming less modest than one is. In order to become more modest than one is, one must actually become more ignorant of one’s goodness than one presently is. Avoiding learning something will not accomplish this.

One must actually lose knowledge that one possesses. Perhaps this could be done through brainwashing or hypnosis; or perhaps one could somehow try to forget certain things (but how successful will this be?). In any case, it defies belief to suppose that this is required in order for one to become more modest than one is. Third, suppose one does, through whatever means, actively practice self-deception so as to become less accurately aware than one was of one's goodness, and thereby does become more modest than one was formerly. Still, what Driver's account makes impossible is doing this in response to an accurate estimation of one's modesty (or, more aptly, one's immodesty). The most one could do is guess that one is not as modest as one should be or adopt a "better-safe-than-sorry" attitude. An account is preferable if it allows one consciously to commit to working at becoming more modest specifically in response to a recognition that one is not as modest as one should be or would like to be.

Second, the requirement for ignorance in Driver's account of modesty is so strong that it seems as though only people who are excessively incredulous or inattentive will count as modest. In addition to asserting that the "modest person will simply not believe that he was that good," Driver says that "the modest person doesn't pick up on signs of her own merit; she is simply insensitive to her own merit."¹⁷ Suppose someone is told by many different people on many different occasions what a fantastic teacher she is. Students frequently come back to see her long after advancing beyond her class, the other teachers regularly come to her for advice, she wins numerous awards over her career as the best teacher in the district, and so on. This person would need to be extremely disbelieving or unobservant in order not to know that she is an *exceptionally* good teacher. The strong suspicion, however, is that this knowledge is precisely the kind that Driver's account precludes. Of course any account of modesty will hold that she is immodest if she believes that she is the best teacher ever, since she has no evidence that she is

that good. She is nonetheless certainly stellar, and should be able both to know exactly this and to count as modest (even regarding her teaching abilities). One need not have an *a priori* commitment to the unity of the virtues¹⁸ to think that a person can be modest without being so dense as not to notice, or so insistently unwilling to believe, what is frankly obvious to any thinking person. It might be replied that Driver's account of modesty does not require this teacher to be obtuse in general, but only about what a great teacher she is. This is unconvincing. It amounts to an implausible suggestion that the modest person will at best be bifurcated with respect to her responsiveness to clear evidence.

Third, the account is in tension with empirical evidence showing how positive self-assessment contributes to personal well-being. Driver says that modesty as she describes it is instrumentally valuable. In fact, she argues that the instrumental value (or disvalue) of a trait is all that really distinguishes virtues from vices. Addressing this broader claim of Driver's is not the primary aim of this paper, though much of what is said here will bear on it, and more specifically, tell against it. She claims that:

Modesty oils the wheels, so to speak. It eases the interaction between people, without being the product of convention. This is because modesty implicitly involves comparison. When the modest person makes the mistake [in his self-estimation], he is comparing his performance to the performance of others—and underestimating it. This is not his conscious program, in the sense that he does not think of himself as comparing. Nevertheless, the psychological mechanism that underpins the making of this sort of mistake is valued because the effects are valued. The modest person fails to elicit the sort of jealousy that a nonmodest person would engender. The modest person is, therefore, less troublesome.¹⁹

Modesty's easing of jealousy, envy, and tension between people "necessarily involves ignorance," says Driver, "because, if we suspected that the person, in fact, was not ignorant, and

thus insincere in his self-evaluation, his behavior would have the opposite effect. One might, for example, feel patronized.”²⁰

However, as Owen Flanagan has pointed out,²¹ a competing conclusion regarding the instrumental value of modesty (when characterized as requiring ignorance) is suggested by psychologists Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown, whose research demonstrates that “certain illusions,” including “unrealistically positive self-evaluations,” are “adaptive for mental health and well-being.”²² Note the contrast here with Driver’s account of modesty, which explicitly requires unrealistically *negative* self-evaluations. Taylor and Brown report that “when the perceptions of happy people are compared to those of people who are relatively more distressed, happy people have higher opinions of themselves.”²³ Moreover, “research evidence indicates that self-enhancement... can be associated with higher motivation, greater persistence, more effective performance, and ultimately, greater success. A chief value of these illusions may be that they can create self-fulfilling prophecies.”²⁴

Taylor and Brown occasionally use the term “low self-esteem” in connection with those who are unrealistically negative in their self-evaluations. Despite a temptation that Driver’s account sometimes invites, it would be a mistake to insist that Driver’s modest person is necessarily someone who has low self-esteem. Driver claims that her underestimation account “is not a low estimation account,” and says that “a modest person could still have a rather high opinion of herself, just not as high as she is entitled to have.”²⁵ She says that “it is important to note... that the modest person must still think his character and deeds to be of some worth.”²⁶ Low self-esteem should not be regarded as modesty and high self-esteem should not be regarded as immodesty; and it can be granted that Driver’s account avoids these conflations. Thus,

discussions of people with low self-esteem are not obviously relevant in the context of a discussion of Driver's account of modesty.

Even so, Taylor and Brown's findings bear on Driver's account because they are not fundamentally about low and high self-esteem (as those terms are commonly understood) but rather simply about detracting and enhancing self-assessments. The self-assessment of Driver's modest person is far from self-enhancing. Indeed, it is just the opposite: Driver makes clear that on her view the modest person is self-detracting. Taylor and Brown's work thus straightforwardly suggests that Driver's modest person will have lower motivation, less persistence, and less effective performance than her immodest counterpart, *ceteris paribus*. This is an undesirable thing to have to admit concerning a virtue, and it is especially troubling for Driver's account of the virtues, which is a consequentialist one. Possessing a virtue should not impose such high costs on the possessor.

Perhaps this last claim is not so obviously true. Morality's demands, the objection goes, are often significant. They seem regularly to call on an agent to make a personal sacrifice: returning the rich miser's wallet, telling the truth even when lying might keep one out of trouble, etc. Notice, however, that there is a competing challenge for those who would defend a very demanding moral theory, i.e., one that labels as duties and virtues at least certain actions and traits the performance or possession of which would impose heavy costs on the performer/possessor. To wit, it is also typically said that those actions that are demanded by a satisfactory moral theory will be ones the agent has reasons for performing. It would, for example, be odd to hear a moral agent say "Keeping promises is morally right, but I do not have a reason to do it." Similarly, it would be odd to hear one say of a character trait *V*, "*V* is a virtue, but I have no reason to possess it." When does one have a reason? Internalism about reasons –

the view that any claim of the form “Person *P* has a reason to Φ ” (where Φ stands for some verb of action) is true only where *P* has some motive, i.e., where something that matters to *P*, will be served or furthered by Φ -ing – has seemed very plausible to many people.²⁷ The purpose here is not to defend internalism, but merely to point out a challenge facing those who would defend an account of a virtue that a moral agent has no apparent “internal” reasons for possessing. An account of a virtue that presupposes neither externalism nor internalism – such as the new account of modesty defended later in this paper – is in better shape than one (like Driver’s account of modesty) that depends on the vindication of externalism.

The aforementioned three criticisms suggest that if there is a competing characterization on which modesty does not require ignorance but still counts as a virtue – and the forthcoming argument will be that there is – then Driver’s needlessly revisionary one can be left behind.

Flanagan’s critical response to Driver’s early work on this subject includes an endorsement of a competing account of modesty as a virtue. Flanagan offers in place of the underestimation account what he calls the non-overestimation account. On this account, “the modest person may well have a perfectly accurate sense of her accomplishments and worth, but she does not overestimate them.”²⁸ Flanagan points to evidence that “most people dramatically overestimate themselves across a wide variety of situations.”²⁹ Hume noted as much, saying, “men have, in general, a much greater propensity to over-value than under-value themselves.”³⁰ If most people do actually overestimate their worth and accomplishments, then the person who gets called modest is one who estimates herself accurately. For support, Flanagan could have cited Philippa Foot’s claim that “there is... a virtue of industriousness only because idleness is a temptation; and of humility only because men tend to think too well of themselves.”³¹ Flanagan

claims that “what we need is not more people who underestimate their self-worth, but more people who do not overestimate their worth and accomplishments.”³²

The main problem with this account is simply that what reasonably counts as non-overestimation often will not actually reasonably count as modesty. The non-overestimator “keeps perspective,” Flanagan says. But keeps perspective on what? Imagine a collegiate sophomore basketball player whose play earns her a spot on a prestigious All-America team. What is involved in this person’s “keeping perspective”? Does she have to bear in mind the fact that basketball is only a game? Well, suppose this player believes and says: “Now I know that basketball is just a game, but I was clearly one of the most dominant players all season long. I flat out carried my team on my back.” Suppose, further, that she was *indeed* the most dominant player and *did* carry the team. This does not sound very modest; but why is it incompatible with non-overestimating? What is the perspective that needs keeping?

Perhaps the modest person keeps perspective by remembering that against the backdrop of the amazing powers of nature, the vastness of the universe, and the magnitude of some of the problems that plague huge groups of people, she is weak, fragile, and imperfect. Perhaps the basketball player will count as modest only if she says/thinks something like: “I had a phenomenal season, but relative to the brokering of a Middle-East peace deal, what I did wasn’t that impressive.” Here she does not seem to be overestimating. But it borders on absurd to think that modesty requires taking this kind of perspective.

The third and final contemporary account to be considered here is the one given by Michael Ridge.³³ Though it lacks a pithy name, it is clearly superior to those given by Driver and Flanagan. Ridge says that “to be modest is to be disposed to de-emphasize your accomplishments for the right reasons.”³⁴ The “for the right reasons” clause is included so as to

rule out false modesty, where one, for example, de-emphasizes one's accomplishments in order to deceive and manipulate others. Ridge identifies problems with counting indifference to how one is esteemed as the "right reason," for among other things, it is too extreme to require that the modest person be altogether indifferent to how she is esteemed. But, Ridge says, "the more moderate view that the modest person must not care *too much* about such esteem is plausible."³⁵ Indeed, this is basically how he interprets the "right reasons" clause; though for two reasons, he adds that the modest person must care somewhat – "enough" is Ridge's term – for how others esteem her. The first reason this is added is to keep the person with utter contempt for others from being the paradigm of modesty. The second reason is to account for the intuition that being modest "includes a disposition to correct others if they have an inflated conception of [the modest person's] accomplishments."³⁶ According to Ridge, someone must care somewhat for how others esteem her in order to be motivated to correct them if they over-estimate her.

Despite its obvious improvements over the other accounts canvassed, there are two primary problems with Ridge's characterization of modesty. The first is that the idea of de-emphasizing one's accomplishments is never even close to sufficiently filled out. Ridge says that de-emphasizing means not going out of your way to stress the significance of your accomplishments, as well as correcting others if they have an exaggerated sense of your accomplishments. This is helpful, but more should be said. The worry is that some behavior that is not intuitively modest is nonetheless going to be consistent with this description of de-emphasizing. In no intuitive sense does the All-American basketball player go "out of her way" to stress the significance of her accomplishments when she tells a room full of reporters peppering her with questions that she carried her team on her back. And if she really did carry

her team, she is not hereby unduly failing to correct others' exaggerated sense of her accomplishments. Still, her words sound boastful, not modest.

The second problem is that Ridge's discussion of the "right reasons" provides insufficient detail. He is right that a compelling account of modesty as a virtue should include the requirement that the modest person do/think/say what she does/thinks/says for the right reasons. However, as will be shown later, he leaves several of what plausibly count as such reasons entirely out of the picture. Furthermore, even the reason to which he points – that the modest person cares enough but not too much about how others esteem her – is not properly specified. Imagine a case where an individual does care "enough" about how others esteem her to be disposed to correct their inflated sense of her accomplishments, but where she is disposed to make this correction for entirely prudential reasons. She might want to correct someone who over-esteems her merely because she believes that if some third party (which does not over-estimate her) knows that she is not issuing corrections when she is being over-esteemed, that third party would somehow punish her. Surely this reason for de-emphasizing one's accomplishments is not sufficient for modesty.³⁷

IV. The Reluctance Account of Modesty

Contrary to what Driver has maintained, the modest person is not one who is ignorant of her goodness. She does not underestimate her goodness, though contrary to what Flanagan has claimed, it is also not enough that she succeeds in not overestimating it. Rather, the modest person is one who has an appropriate attitude toward her goodness, and whose actions and demeanor reflect this attitude. This much is generally consistent with Ridge's account. But the question now is: what is the "appropriate" attitude? It is not just that one's accomplishments

should be de-emphasized (for the right reasons). The appropriate attitude is better described as a general reluctance – underpinned by the right normative reasons – to evaluate oneself in terms of one’s goodness.

Connecting modesty to a reluctance to examine oneself thoroughly in terms of accomplishments is one of Driver’s important insights. What she misses is that one can be reluctant to examine oneself in terms of accomplishments without being genuinely ignorant of one’s real self-worth. In fact, Driver’s modest person is not so much reluctant as she is unable to examine herself in terms of accomplishments, since she is in some sense ignorant of them. The appropriate account of modesty does not deny that the modest person’s goodness – her intelligence, physical strength, musical abilities, wit, good looks, bravery, etc. – is truly exceptional, does not require that she not know this, and indeed does not prevent her from appreciating her goodness. Rather, the modest person is reluctant to evaluate herself in terms of her goodness. She takes the fact that she is so good to be, in many settings, and for the appropriate reasons, bad to harp on or flaunt. This general account will be dubbed the reluctance account of modesty.

One might wonder if it would be better instead to call it the reticence account, which might be thought to convey more by implication concerning what it is that the modest person is reluctant to do. The worry with using this label is that ‘reticence’ seems to suggest primarily an inclination to be a certain way – namely silent or uncommunicative – in speech, whereas the right characterization of modesty will focus equally on how one thinks of oneself and how one behaves (over and above performing speech acts). ‘Reluctant’ is a broad enough term to accommodate all of these aspects of modesty.

A few points of clarification are in order. ‘Flaunt’ and ‘harp’ are, of course, not value-neutral terms. They are normative, and pejorative at that. The problems with deriving normative conclusions from purely descriptive premises are well established. It should thus be neither surprising nor troubling that the characterization of modesty settled upon does not altogether eschew normative terminology. Roughly, to flaunt is to force or impose oneself without warrant or request, to display ostentatiously or imprudently. And to harp is roughly to dwell on a subject tiresomely or irritatingly. Beyond this, the terms will here be left mostly unanalyzed. The extent of the philosophical literature on modesty suggests that it is a notion regarding which there is confusion. It seems reasonably clear that there are basic shared understandings of the notions of flaunting and harping that are clearer than of the notion of modesty. If this paper succeeds, part of its success consists in linking the relatively muddled notion of modesty with the relatively clear notions of flaunting and harping (and reluctance too). There is, however, room for reasonable disagreement on the precise meaning of these latter terms, and this can underpin some residual reasonable disagreement about who is modest.

Clearly, not every instance of speaking quite highly about oneself is an instance of flaunting or harping. If one is interviewing for a job, speaking highly of oneself may be perfectly appropriate, and since flaunting and harping are inappropriate, speaking highly of oneself in such a situation is not flaunting or harping. Relatedly, reluctance to examine oneself thoroughly in terms of abilities and accomplishments is not the same as a flat refusal to do so and not the same as total reluctance to examine oneself thoroughly in any terms. Still, there are plainly many times when evaluating oneself in terms of one’s accomplishments is inappropriate, and the immodest person is one who tends nonetheless to do so at these times. And finally, while flaunting and harping are typically done to others, this need not be the case. One can harp

on or flaunt some feature of oneself to oneself, and can do so simply by dwelling too long in one's own mind on that feature. One can be immodest for lacking reluctance so to dwell.

One may object at this point that some people who obsess about their self-worth actually tend to denigrate themselves, and that we would not describe such people as reluctant to evaluate themselves, but would also not deny that they are modest. Insecurity, the claim goes, breeds modesty, not immodesty.³⁸ Frankly, it is precisely because it would be wrong to say that such a person is reluctant to evaluate herself in terms of her abilities and accomplishments (or lack thereof, as the case may be) that such a person should not be called modest (though it also seems strange to call her immodest). Such a person is doing something the modest person would not do, namely wondering and worrying always about how good she is. The genuinely modest person does not concern herself – at least not so much – with these thoughts. Self-obsession, even where one ultimately thinks in unrealistically negative terms about oneself, is not compatible with modesty. Moreover, the distinction between modesty and self-denigration should be preserved; self-denigration is not the same as modesty, and is in fact not even compatible with it.

The strong suspicion is that most people – if not instinctively, then at least if they were led to reflect carefully on the issue – would agree that the self-obsessing self-denigrator is not modest. Even if this suspicion is mistaken, however, an important methodological point remains (though it is one that cannot be fully defended here). There is good reason for endorsing what Richard Brandt terms the “method of reforming definitions” (as opposed, say, to the “method of linguistic intuitionism”).³⁹ He approvingly cites R. B. Perry, who rightly “says that the question for philosophers is not how normative words are used, for they are used confusedly, but how they are best to be used.”⁴⁰ Thus, if it is false to say that the person the objector describes would

not intuitively be counted as modest, then although the reluctance account is not intended to be a revisionary account of modesty, some amending of this normal understanding of modesty would be in order. There would, in this case, be reason to work to stop seeing the self-obsessing self-denigrator as modest.

It was maintained above that the modest person assesses herself in the way she does for the “right reasons.” Whether an attribution of a particular trait to someone is appropriate often depends on whether her reasons for thinking or acting as she does have been rightly identified. When someone is referred to as generous, for example, it is typically taken that her giving is motivated by her desire to help others. If it is concluded that she is instead motivated merely by a tax-break, she is generally no longer rightly called generous. Modesty, too, seems to be such a trait. One is not genuinely modest if, for example, her only concern is to manipulate others into forming a favorable opinion of her so that she herself may prosper.

More plausible as reasons for the kind of reluctance being appealed to here are the following:

(1) Such reluctance is a way of respecting and honoring one’s fellows and oneself. It is a way holding one’s fellows in high regard, of affirming them, of not degrading or belittling them, particularly when one excels in areas where these fellows do not, and where one’s accomplishments have somehow dimmed the spotlight on others’ accomplishments. It honors oneself since it is a way of affirming to oneself that one’s value does not entirely consist in one’s particular talents and accomplishments.⁴¹ Immodesty is often, though not always, tied to an obsessive dependence on others’ admiration. The modest person is comfortable with, and confident in, herself. She does not stroke her own ego, and typically does not need others to see just how good she is. This is not to deny, of course, that there may be occasions where she sees

people of lesser talents and accomplishments immodestly flaunt themselves and thereby succeed in procuring important benefits (like a promotion, for example). In such a case, modesty should not be incompatible with her wanting certain others to see how good she is.

(2) Such reluctance is part of an appropriate acknowledgment of the extent to which each person is simply the product of the genetic and environmental accidents of her birth. The modest person recognizes, and responds appropriately to, the fact that, in Nietzsche's words, "we are not the work of ourselves."⁴² Understanding the real sources of one's merit gives one a reason to be modest. If someone lacks modesty, it is as if she ignores the extent to which the ultimate causes of her goodness are outside of her control. This is not meant to entail denial of the possibility that one's goodness could have come through extraordinary hard work, self-discipline, self-motivation, etc. But the modest person acknowledges the influences outside of her that contributed to her goodness.

(3) Such reluctance is duly deferential to one's higher self. Modesty is not just a matter of comparing oneself to others. Part of the ground for modesty comes when one compares one's usual or everyday self to the self one is capable of being, and finds that the former pales in comparison to the latter, regardless of how good or able one actually is. Being modest is appropriate once one realizes that one seldom lives up to one's higher self. It is possible that someone who recognizes that she falls short of her higher self could become obsessed with reaching that higher self, and might then be anxious, not reluctant, to evaluate how close to this ideal she is. But another person who sees that she falls short of her higher self might become reluctant to evaluate herself in terms of her abilities and accomplishments, and this person should count as having a good reason for her reluctance.

The claim is not that these three considerations will necessarily cause people to be modest, but rather that they are good normative reasons. It would be a mistake to insist that the aforementioned three reasons exhaust the reasons for the relevant kind of reluctance. In any case, all three of them are meant to be understood in a significantly, though not entirely, non-consequentialist way. Respecting and honoring oneself and others, appropriately acknowledging that one is not entirely the work of oneself, and being duly deferential to one's higher self may all three have good consequences; but it is not simply in virtue of the consequences that these count as good reasons for the kind of reluctance that characterizes modesty. Driver's account seeks to explain the virtuousness of the virtues in entirely consequentialist terms, and as such it is impoverished. It fails to accommodate adequately the three aforementioned reasons for not flaunting or harping on one's goodness and for being, instead, generally reluctant to evaluate oneself in terms of one's abilities and accomplishments.

The reluctance account avoids both horns of the putative dilemma that worried Driver. Far from requiring ignorance, the reluctance account essentially precludes it. The modest person is not incapable of noticing or accurately assessing her goodness. If the modest person does not notice on her own, others will point it out to her, and she may thereby come to understand fairly accurately how good she is. There is no need to maintain that the modest person cannot acknowledge, to herself and to others, her extreme goodness. No doubt many people who are typically taken to be modest are people who have, deep down at least, an accurate sense of how good they are, but feel themselves unable to let others know that they have this sense. In fact, the modest person need not pretend that she does not have this sense. And when she deflects attention from her goodness, this is not in order to manipulate others. She can do this without

being insincere or dishonest; and if she is being dishonest, she does not count as genuinely modest.

When the All-American basketball player is complimented on her game, responses such as “Oh, I didn’t realize I played well” or “No, it was nothing special” are not the ones required in order to count as modest. Indeed, either these are based on ignorance, or they are insincere and manipulative. Hence they are inconsistent with modesty. “Thank you, I appreciate the compliment and am glad you enjoyed my performance” is a perfectly modest response. This does not require ignorance and need not involve dishonesty or insincerity. When asked to reflect on her overall performance, she does not, in order to count as modest, have to deny that she played extremely well. But she should not harp on her great season, particularly in response to a casual question. She should realize she plays a team game and that she needlessly detracts from her teammates by flaunting the fact that she is a better player than them. She should also appropriately acknowledge having some natural talent, some good coaching, some opportunities to develop her talent, etc. And she should give due recognition to the fact that she is not yet the best player she can be (though she should be careful that actually saying as much not be misinterpreted as a kind of immodesty).

The reluctance account can explain the oddness of the statement “I am modest.” The modest person’s considerable modesty will be among the terms in which she prefers not to evaluate herself; if anything, she prefers instead to evaluate herself in terms of how she can improve at being modest. In certain contexts, simply saying “I am modest” will count as flaunting one’s modesty, something the genuinely modest person would not be disposed to do. This is why the assertion is odd. But it should be taken to be a strength of the reluctance account that the modest person can know that she is modest and even that she can in certain contexts say

so. There is nothing odd about asserting “I am modest” during a quiet conversation with a good friend about the personal qualities one values possessing, and the reluctance account allows for this.

The modest person might incur certain costs that someone who wildly exaggerates her goodness does not. But since the modest person is not deeply unaware of how good she is, she should not be expected to suffer all the instrumental losses that her immodest counterpart (including Driver’s modest person) would suffer. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect the benefits of modesty for the modest person to outweigh the costs she will incur for it (though given the non-consequentialist strain in the reluctance account, the account’s success does not strictly depend on the veracity of these speculative empirical claims). The modest person will not be underconfident, but will also not generally be overconfident. She will thus appreciate her limits and set herself to tasks at which she can reasonably expect to succeed. She casts attention away from herself, and thus gives herself a less pressure-filled environment in which to work. She will perhaps be better disposed than her immodest counterpart to recognize and make good her own shortcomings. And her modesty clearly assists her in having more productive relationship with others. She will be more likely to let others help her (when being helped is appropriate), and more likely to ask for help. She may be less apt to feel contemptuous towards others, thinking them imbecilic, incompetent, ignorant, untalented, etc. She is more likely to have the attitude of a team player and so is less likely than her immodest counterpart to ruffle others’ feathers and engender resentment and envy.

Importantly, the reluctance account maintains modesty among the virtues without requiring the fundamental – and troublesome – re-envisaging of the nature of virtues that Driver suggests. It is highly doubtful that there are any moral virtues that are constituted by, or based

upon, ignorance. But it should be clear that even if there are, modesty nevertheless is not among them. In contrast to Driver's account, the reluctance account treats modesty as a virtue without attempting to do so within an entirely consequentialist framework. Even if not everyone is a dyed-in-the-wool Kantian, there are some important non-consequentialist intuitions and considered commitments – including, among others, commitments regarding the virtues – that are widely shared and that should be upheld. Driver does not supply sufficient reasons for making the radical move of jettisoning these deontological commitments in our moral consciousness. Characterizing modesty as a virtue certainly does not require doing so.

Modesty precludes the hasty conclusion that everything that has been argued in this paper is absolutely correct. But it seems to be on the right track, and if just that much is true, it can confidently be asserted that modesty can quite reasonably be considered a virtue.

NOTES:

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¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Greek Interpreter" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, (New York: Gramercy Books, 2002), pp. 185-190. This quote was seemingly first employed in a contemporary philosophical context by Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 373-384.

² Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially Chapter 2, "The Virtues of Ignorance," which is based upon the paper of the same title cited in Note 2.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1125a1, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Jonathan Barnes (ed.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 1775.

⁴ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, J. B. Schneewind (ed.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), p. 70.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “Servility and Self-Respect,” *The Monist* 57 (1973), pp. 87-104.

⁸ See Note 3.

⁹ Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹³ Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” p. 378.

¹⁴ Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Thanks to Ridge and Driver, both of whom suggested this reply.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ There is a unity of the virtues if all virtues are compatible with one another.

¹⁹ Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” p. 384.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

²¹ Flanagan, “Virtue and Ignorance,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 420-428 (p. 424).

²² Taylor and Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health,” *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (1988), pp. 193-210 (p. 193).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²⁵ Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, p. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁷ See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 1998), pp. 363-373.

²⁸ Flanagan, *ibid.*, p. 424.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

³⁰ Hume, *ibid.*

³¹ Foot, “Virtues and Vices,” in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979). ‘Humility’ here can reasonably be understood as synonymous with ‘modesty’ as it is used in this paper.

³² Flanagan, *ibid.*

³³ Ridge, “Modesty as a Virtue,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (2000), pp. 269-283.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 277.

³⁷ For this criticism, the author acknowledges a debt to Neil Tennant.

³⁸ Thanks to Michael Ridge for suggesting this wrinkle.

³⁹ See Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), especially pp. 1-10.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

⁴¹ See Thomas Hill, Jr., “Social Snobbery and Human Dignity,” in *Autonomy and Self-Respect*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 155-172, for a detailed discussion of honoring.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Book I, Sec. 588.