

The Social Dimensions of Modesty

SCOTT WOODCOCK
University of Victoria
PO Box 3045, STN CSC
Victoria BC V8W 3P4
Canada

Modesty is a surprisingly complicated character trait. Most of us feel that we intuitively understand what modesty is, and we feel confident that we can recognize modesty when it is exhibited in others. However, it is difficult to provide a detailed account of modesty without discovering that it is not nearly as simple as one initially presumes it to be. For example, in her recent book *Uneasy Virtue*, Julia Driver proposes a definition of modesty that seems uncomplicated until further reflection reveals it to be more intricate and contentious than it appears. Driver claims that modesty is the virtue of being disposed to persistently underestimate one's self-worth despite available evidence suggesting that this estimation is incorrect.¹ There is something compelling about such a concise definition of modesty, but Driver's view implies that a modest agent is truly ignorant of her natural talents, accomplishments or other attributes that contribute to assessments of her self-worth. It is this feature of Driver's definition that has generated debate since she first presented her view of modesty in an influential article that preceded her book.² Critics claim that it is counterintuitive to require modest agents to be ignorant of their natural talents and accomplishments, for it hardly seems virtuous to be disposed to make chronic errors of judg-

1 Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 21

2 Julia Driver, 'The Virtues of Ignorance' *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989) 373-84

ment in spite of available evidence. Driver's underestimation definition of modesty endorses a kind of persistent epistemic defect, and this is not a quality ordinarily considered to be morally praiseworthy.³

What is most interesting about Driver's definition of modesty is the fact that there is no widely accepted analysis of the virtue according to which hers can be viewed as an unconventional alternative. Instead of entering the literature as a response to some well-established view regarding the nature of modesty, Driver's paper has become the starting point of the current debate over the definition and moral status of the virtue. There is at least some agreement among those involved in the debate, since most contributors agree that modesty ought to be considered a virtue — a less insipid accord than it seems, given modesty's potential connection to ignorance. However, the contributors disagree among themselves when it comes to pinpointing what modesty is and explaining why exactly it is a virtue. Some claim that modesty is simply the disposition to not overestimate one's self-worth.⁴ Others claim that modesty involves being an egalitarian who recognizes the equal worth of all human beings.⁵ Still others claim that modesty is a disposition to not care whether others are impressed with oneself for one's accomplishments.⁶

In this paper, I will argue that none of the definitions presented so far has been able to capture the elusive nature of modesty. Specifically, I argue that these attempts to define modesty fail because they are unable to adequately account for the virtue's social dimensions. Modesty is a valuable disposition for moral agents to possess because it alleviates some of the jealousy, bitterness and other caustic emotions that arise

3 Note, however, that it is precisely the connection between virtue and epistemic defect that Driver seeks to establish, for her interest in modesty is to present it as an example of the fact that the virtues need not fulfill the traditional Aristotelian requirement that virtuous action be performed with an awareness of *why* the action is virtuous. Driver presents other virtues to make her point (e.g. blind charity, impulsive courage and special forms of forgiveness and trust), but modesty is her flagship example of a virtue that does not require agents to knowingly exhibit the practical wisdom necessary to exhibit modesty according to an Aristotelian understanding of the virtues.

4 See Owen Flanagan, 'Virtue and Ignorance' *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990) 420-8. A similar description of humility can be found in Norvin Richards, 'Is Humility a Virtue?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1998) 253-9.

5 See A.T. Nuyen, 'Just Modesty' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998) 101-9, and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, 'The Virtue of Modesty' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993) 235-46.

6 See G.F. Schueler, 'Why IS Modesty a Virtue?' *Ethics* 109 (1999) 835-41.

in social contexts where the comparative merits of agents are publicly acknowledged. It serves a delicate social function by discouraging unhealthy forms of competitive ranking, and it promotes harmony among agents who perceive themselves to be unequal with respect to their natural talents and accomplishments. Of course, most contributors to the discussion recognize that modesty serves this social function. However, they all fail to adequately account for the social dimensions of modesty when formulating their definitions of the virtue. What is required is a definition of modesty that captures our considered intuitions about modest agents without failing to do justice to the social dimensions of the virtue's unique character.

The paper is structured as follows. In section one, I argue that so-called *cognitive* and *evaluative* definitions of modesty are destined to fail because they do not include conditions designed to mediate the way that agents present themselves to others. If the social function of modesty is an essential feature of the virtue, then it will not suffice to define modesty strictly in terms of beliefs or normative evaluations without ensuring that these beliefs or evaluations are reliably connected to proper social behaviour. Driver, in particular, ought to be sensitive to the social function of modesty because she explicitly attributes modesty's moral value to its social consequences. However, she provides an inadequate definition of modesty, I argue, because she is overly concerned with ruling out false modesty and subsequently dismisses the possibility of allowing a modest person to evaluate her self-worth accurately but de-emphasize her talents and accomplishments when interacting with others.

In section two, I discuss the definition of modesty provided by Michael Ridge.⁷ Ridge, in my opinion, offers the most persuasive analysis of modesty in the literature so far. Nevertheless, I argue that his definition of modesty is inadequate because he, like Driver, attempts to rule out false modesty using means that lead him to neglect the social aspects of modesty and to subsequently present an overly individualistic account of the virtue. In section three I present my own definition of modesty and compare it to rival definitions. In section four I identify some noteworthy features of my definition in order to promote its advantages. The aim is to pinpoint the vital elements of modesty without losing sight of the social basis for its status as a morally praiseworthy human virtue.

7 Michael Ridge, 'Modesty as a Virtue' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (2000) 269-83

I

To begin, I will initially set aside the senses of ‘modesty’ that refer to sexual modesty and humility. The sense of modesty at stake here is the sense that is broadly captured by the following definition: ‘The quality of being unassuming or of having a moderate opinion of oneself; reserve or reticence arising from an unexaggerated estimate of one’s qualities and abilities; freedom from presumption, ostentation, arrogance, or pride.’⁸ An adequate definition of the *virtue* of modesty need not capture all the components of this common usage definition of modesty, but as a general characterization it is sufficient to map out the territory at stake. Thus, I will not initially discuss the virtue of modesty in terms of a disposition to avoid lewdness or an appropriate recognition of one’s inferiority compared to God. I believe that these conceptions of modesty can be understood as special cases of the virtue of modesty, as I define it, but I will set aside this point until section four. There I argue that it is an advantage of my definition of modesty that it allows sexual modesty and humility to be incorporated within a single, comprehensive conception of the virtue once its social dimensions are illuminated.

Definitions of modesty can be roughly divided into three categories. Definitions that require modest agents to accept a particular set of beliefs are referred to as *cognitive* definitions. This category includes both underestimation accounts, like the one defended by Driver, and non-overestimation accounts, like the one defended by Owen Flanagan.⁹ Alternatively, definitions that require modest agents to endorse evaluative attitudes, like the claim that all humans possess equal worth, are described as *evaluative* definitions of modesty. A.T. Nuyen and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev defend evaluative definitions of this kind.¹⁰ Finally, definitions that require modest agents to present themselves in certain ways to others can be described as *presentation* definitions of modesty. Presentation definitions of modesty, as I will categorize them, can place conditions on the motives that lead to the behaviour of modest agents; thus, such definitions can include conditions that require modest agents to endorse specific beliefs or evaluations. However, these definitions are primarily grounded in the ways that agents present themselves to others. G.F. Schuler originally introduced the term ‘presentation account’

8 See ‘modesty, n^{3a}.’ *OED online*, September 2002, Oxford University Press, 29 November 2005, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00313128>>.

9 Flanagan, ‘Virtue and Ignorance’

10 See ‘Just Modesty’ and ‘The Virtue of Modesty’ respectively.

of modesty, but he attributes this term to a view that he rejects.¹¹ Therefore, according to my categorization, only Michael Ridge and Daniel Statman defend presentation definitions of modesty in recent work on the subject.¹²

Given this method of classifying the definitions of modesty proposed in the recent literature, it is surprisingly easy to see that neither cognitive nor evaluative definitions of modesty are sufficient to fully account for the characteristics that we attribute to modest persons. Let us begin with Julia Driver's definition of modesty. Recall that she defines modesty as the disposition to underestimate self-worth to some reasonable extent, even in spite of available evidence. That this disposition alone is not sufficient for a person to be modest is best demonstrated by the possibility of an individual who underestimates her self-worth yet brags about her accomplishments to others. For example, suppose Glenda is the best chess player in North America and that she has reliable evidence to this effect, e.g. she recently won the North American chess championship. Suppose, however, that she considers herself to be the seventh best chess player in North America. She claims that her recent championship was a fluke, though it clearly was not, and she steadfastly refuses to be persuaded by arguments to the contrary. Glenda is now a model agent for Driver's underestimation account of modesty, but suppose Glenda is a merciless braggart within her local community. She is, sadly, the type of person who constantly reminds her local competitors that she is a superior chess player compared to them. Specifically, she informs them again and again that she is the seventh best player in North America and that this ranking dramatically exceeds those of her local competitors. In this way, Glenda has a marked disposition for underestimating her own talent, yet she takes great pleasure in publicizing her false estimations of her talent to others. It seems clear that we do not want to describe Glenda as a modest person. She is perhaps in denial or lacks self-esteem in some very specific way, but the enthusiasm with which she tells her local competitors that she is comparatively great disqualifies her from being modest.¹³

11 'Why Modesty is a Virtue,' *Ethics* 107 (1997) 467-85. Schuler uses the term 'presentation account' of modesty to refer to a strictly behavioural definition of the virtue that sets no further conditions on the reasons motivating the modest agent to behave in the specified way. This view obviously invites problems with false modesty. See 475-7. Schuler's own view is not easily classified; see fn. 25 below.

12 See Daniel Statman, 'Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment,' *Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992) 420-38, and Ridge, 'Modesty as a Virtue.'

13 Both Schuler (1999, 827) and Ridge (271) pick up on this point. Schuler presents the hypothetical case of Albert: the third best physicist in the world who incorrectly

This problem with Driver's definition may appear to be specially connected to her requirement that agents underestimate their self-worth, but this is not the case. Critics of Driver, however, tend to focus primarily on her underestimation requirement and end up falling into the same general trap of failing to emphasize the importance of the way that agents present themselves to each other. For example, in his critique of Driver's account of modesty, Flanagan claims that modesty ought to be defined as the disposition to not overestimate one's accomplishments or self-worth. He cites evidence suggesting that most people tend to overestimate their own accomplishments, and he claims that modesty is the comparatively rare virtue of avoiding 'certain natural tendencies to frame things in self-serving ways.'¹⁴ This definition of modesty avoids the difficulties associated with requiring that modest agents are ignorant of their own accomplishments or self-worth, but it remains a cognitive definition that makes no guarantees about how so-called modest agents will interact with their peers. Hence Flanagan's definition runs into the same type of counterexample as Driver's definition.

To see that this is the case, imagine that Glen is far and away the best chess player in his local community. He is not a good enough player to win tournaments beyond this local level of competition, but he recognizes this fact and, generally speaking, possesses an entirely accurate conception of himself and his abilities. Glen now qualifies as a modest person according to Flanagan's definition, but if he concludes his local chess games by telling his vanquished opponents, 'Wow, I am no national champion but I am clearly one hell of a lot better than *you!*' then clearly we should not describe him as a modest person. He is perhaps less arrogant than an otherwise similar agent who thinks that he is a better chess player than he actually is, but he is not a modest person just because he does not overestimate his abilities. Hence, Flanagan's defi-

believes he is the fifth best physicist in the world and brags about this underestimated status to his peers. Similarly, Ridge entertains the idea that Einstein might have been boastful even if he underestimated his momentous accomplishments. In neither case is it intuitive to think the agent is modest. Driver does not address these types of examples in *Uneasy Virtue*. However, in a prior exchange with Schuler she claims that Albert is a modest agent, though he is an anomalous case where the virtue is not 'functioning normally' ('Modesty and Ignorance' *Ethics* 109 (1999) 827-34, at 829). This is not an entirely satisfying response considering how easy it is to imagine boastful agents who persistently underestimate their self-worth.

14 Flanagan, 427. The evidence in question is discussed in more detail in his subsequent book, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991).

inition, like Driver's definition, is unable to capture the social features that make modesty a virtuous character trait.

Evaluative definitions of modesty are similarly ill equipped to acknowledge the social dimensions of the virtue. For example, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev claims that modesty is an evaluative attitude rather than an epistemic state. Specifically, he claims that the modest agent is one who realizes that her fundamental human worth is equal to (or at least very similar to) the worth of other human beings.¹⁵ A modest person, according to Ben-Ze'ev, is someone who may accurately estimate her self-worth, but she is someone who keeps her accomplishments and abilities in perspective in the sense that she does not overrate their significance. She is, in effect, a type of egalitarian who can accurately recognize the differences between human beings without losing sight of the fact that our shared moral worth eclipses all such differences. Again, however, we can imagine an example of an agent who fulfills Ben-Ze'ev's definition of modesty but who is surely not someone we would want to describe as modest. For instance, if Glen's local opponents grow tired of his gloating and begin to remind him that they possess the same fundamental worth as he does, Glen might respond by saying:

I am aware of the fact that chess is just a game and that my superiority at playing this game does not make me a more worthy human being in any fundamental sense. On that we agree. I am merely pointing out the fact, trivial as it may be in the grand scheme of things, that I am a vastly superior chess player compared to you. We are all moral equals, yes, but I could capture your king with half my pawns and a serious concussion.

In short, it is possible for a person to be an egalitarian in the evaluative sense required by Ben-Ze'ev's definition of modesty without necessarily being a modest person.

One might, of course, dispute the existence of an agent like Glen if he or she truly embodied the type of egalitarianism that Ben-Ze'ev has in mind. How could Glen be so insensitive to his opponents if he really believes that all humans possess a fundamentally equal moral worth? A fair representation of the type of agents implied by an evaluative definition of modesty might be thought to be strictly incompatible with behaviour of this kind. It may be possible to be mistaken with respect to epistemic assessments of one's abilities and accomplishments and

15 Ben-Ze'ev, 235-7. Note that Daniel Statman defends a definition of modesty that is closely related to the definition provided by Ben-Ze'ev, but because Statman explicitly recognizes the importance of how agents present themselves to others I classify his position as a presentation definition of modesty.

still act insensitively towards others, but proponents of evaluative definitions of modesty can argue that it is not possible to act like Glen without having failed to properly endorse the evaluative aspect of an attitude like the conviction that all humans possess equal value.

This method of responding to counterexamples like Glen is tempting, but it fails for at least three reasons. First, as a matter of empirical fact, it is not clear that an agent like Glen is precluded from being able to endorse evaluative attitudes like the egalitarian attitude proposed by Ben-Ze'ev. As he is presented above, Glen is boastful to the point of being callous, but he need not be insincere when claiming that he recognizes the moral equality of all humans. In fact, Glen might be a principled person with strong egalitarian convictions. He may simply be someone who believes that our equal moral worth grants us inalienable rights that do not include the right to not be taunted after losing voluntarily played games of chess. Perhaps he is tireless advocate for causes like the prevention of torture or the promotion of equal access to education and affordable health care. He could nevertheless believe that chess is a recreational pastime that, by widely accepted convention, includes the rightful opportunity for players to revel in the glory of their accomplishments. To dismiss the possibility of this type of boastful person risks begging important questions about the content of evaluative attitudes like the egalitarian claim that humans possess equal moral value.¹⁶

Second, even if one were to accept the supposition that a true egalitarian cannot possibly be immodest, it is not helpful to conflate modesty and egalitarianism by defining the former strictly in terms of the latter. The attempt to provide a definition for the virtue of modesty is an attempt to isolate what is unique about this particular character trait and, for most commentators, to describe why it is a valuable character trait to possess. If one defines the virtue of modesty as an endorsement

16 Furthermore, Glen's immodesty is presented with rhetorical flourish to make a point, but we can imagine other, less flamboyant, types of immodest egalitarian agents. For example, Gladys might conclude her victorious chess matches with the following attempt to *console* her opponents: 'Please don't feel bad about losing the match so quickly. Remember that you are a human being just like everyone else, and losing at chess won't change that. Besides, I am an extremely good player — you really shouldn't expect to be able to beat someone who is as skilled at playing the game as I am. I mean, I'm so good that I could probably capture...' Gladys might feel genuine sympathy for her opponents in a way that Glen does not, but if her benevolent attempts to console her opponents include long, forthright descriptions of her talents, then she is similarly not a modest person. This is noteworthy because it would seem especially ad hoc to claim that an agent like Gladys cannot endorse the type of egalitarian attitude that Ben-Ze'ev has in mind.

of egalitarian principles, then one has changed the subject even if it is the case that every egalitarian is a modest person. For example, every true egalitarian will also presumably be fair and honest, but we do not want our definition of these virtues to be synonymous with the definition of modesty (or each other). What we want is a specific description of modesty; we do not want to be redirected to a more general category of virtue that is related to modesty no matter how interesting the relations between this category and modesty may be.

Third, even if one accepts that true egalitarianism is sufficient for modesty, it is surely not a necessary condition for an agent to exhibit the virtue. Someone might hold the evaluative attitude that some types of humans are fundamentally superior to others and still be a modest person. For example, even the most contemptible of racists might be modest if he or she places an appropriately diminished value on her own talents and accomplishments compared to those of others. Such a person will be vicious in a much more important respect because he or she will be unjust, but we can nevertheless imagine that this person is modest. For example, imagine that Jim is a gifted baseball pitcher who constantly downplays his abilities. He believes that his talent for throwing a baseball is not as important as others make it out to be, and so he constantly downplays this talent and the accomplishments that it brings him. However, Jim happens to be a racist (though he rarely makes this fact known because he is too modest to assume that others care about his political beliefs). In this case, it would be wrong to deny that Jim could potentially be a modest person even if we feel reluctant to attribute any virtuous traits to someone who endorses an evaluative attitude as offensive as the idea that humans do not possess equal moral worth.¹⁷

Considering how quickly one can generate counterexamples to both cognitive and evaluative definitions of modesty, the obvious question to ask is why proponents of these definitions disregard the social dimensions of the virtue. They address a broad range of other foreseen obstacles, yet the question of how agents present themselves to others is often ignored, set aside or overtly dismissed as an issue that is

17 Note that one can also generate examples of agents who reject egalitarianism because they believe the group to which they belong is *inferior* compared to other groups. Michael Ridge provides an example of this kind: a person who believes that some human beings are fundamentally more valuable than others (e.g. a person who accepts some type of caste system), yet one who believes she belongs to the group of persons who are comparatively the *least* valuable (270). As Ridge points out, this person could surely be modest despite the fact that she does not endorse an egalitarian evaluative attitude.

not a legitimate concern for a proper account of modesty. Part of the explanation for this omission is the fact that many accounts of modesty are responses to Julia Driver's view, and these responses are often so concerned with demonstrating that modesty need not require underestimation of self-worth that the question of how a modest agent ought to interact with others is just not acknowledged. However, part of the problem is an explicit aversion to the idea that a modest agent is someone who knowingly regulates the way she appears to others. For proponents of cognitive or evaluative definitions of modesty, an agent who consciously attempts to present herself in an appropriately 'modest' way is someone who exhibits false modesty rather than authentic modesty. A modest agent, for these commentators, is someone who possesses an admirable individual virtue that tends to have beneficial social effects without the agent knowingly attempting to achieve these social effects. The social benefits of modesty, on this view, are important by-products of an internal epistemic or evaluative state exhibited by the agent — they cannot be directly intended benefits that the modest agent seeks to achieve.

The idea underlying the requirement that a modest agent not consciously seek to appear modest to others is the assumption that an agent who knowingly adjusts her social behaviour is guilty of insincerity if not outright deception. The fear is that if a definition of modesty allows agents to consciously seek to appear modest, then it may inadvertently end up including the agent who possesses an inflated opinion of herself but who falsely presents an underestimated image of herself to others in order to appear that much more admirable to them. This is clearly not an agent to whom we want to attribute the virtue of modesty, so proponents of cognitive and evaluative definitions of modesty avoid *any* requirements that specify dispositions for agents to behave in particular ways towards their peers. This drastic step is especially interesting in the case of Julia Driver, because she believes the moral value of modesty is grounded in the virtue's consequences. One might assume that a consequentialist account of the virtues need not be so hostile towards false modesty, but Driver explicitly denies that modesty is partly constituted by the ways in which the modest person is disposed to act towards others.¹⁸ In her words:

18 Driver does allow that false modesty could count as an aesthetic virtue because such behaviour is thought of as polite (*Uneasy Virtue*, 25), but she sharply distinguishes it from the moral virtue of true modesty.

Modesty is something that is internal: it is basically an attitude of ignorance that one has toward oneself. The sort of person [who is aware of his self-worth but simply doesn't want to talk about it] is simply abstaining from a type of behaviour... and abstaining from this type of behavior can be correlated with modesty but does not itself constitute modesty. If we regard behavior as a sufficient condition for modesty, then we will include cases where a person is insincere in exhibiting 'modest' behavior; if we regard behavior as a necessary condition for modesty, then we will be leaving out cases where a person is modest, or at least has modest dispositions, but doesn't exhibit behavior that can be characterized as modest.¹⁹

Driver's dilemma is easily solved by regarding a disposition for modest behaviour, rather than the behaviour itself, as a necessary condition for modesty. But the more important feature of this passage is her emphasis on the claim that modesty is an internal state that must not be confused with an insincere exhibition of seemingly modest behaviour. This claim is one that critics of Driver tend to accept even if they dispute her primary claim that modest agents must underestimate their self-worth.

Driver and her critics are certainly correct to want to avoid endorsing the kind of false modesty that involves arrogant beliefs masked behind a veneer of restraint for the sake of eliciting further admiration. But the decision to forsake any necessary conditions regarding social behaviour in one's definition of modesty, for fear of endorsing the most glaring cases of false modesty, is a decision based on a false dichotomy. The decision assumes that an agent is either: (a) modest in some internally specified sense and entirely forthright with others about her accomplishments and self-worth; or else (b) internally immodest and necessarily deceiving others in some morally unacceptable way. However, this exclusive disjunction does not reflect the range of options at stake. It is possible for a person to be less than entirely forthright with her peers yet not be deceitful. Similarly, it is possible for a person to knowingly regulate the way that she presents herself to others without being insincere. To think otherwise is to underestimate the complexity of human social interaction and to ignore the subtle methods that agents can use to downplay their accomplishments without being disrespectful to those with whom they interact.

For instance, one can avoid introducing the subject of one's accomplishments if one knows that doing so will cause feelings of anxiety, jealousy or inadequacy among others.²⁰ Despite what Driver suggests, a disposition to behave in this way need not be insincere or motivated

19 *Uneasy Virtue*, 19

20 Note that I will often speak only of accomplishments for the sake of brevity. Unless otherwise stated, I intend the same points to be made for natural talents and other factors that contribute to self-worth.

by a self-serving desire to appear noble; moreover, when others raise the subject of one's accomplishments, one can de-emphasize their greatness without being deceptive or insincere. It is possible to delicately shift the focus of attention away from the greatness of one's own accomplishments, or at least one's own responsibility for these accomplishments, using a number of innocuous tactics, such as (1) reciprocating the compliment by pointing out the related accomplishments of others; (2) thanking those who identify one's accomplishments for the compliment, thereby directing attention to their generosity without proceeding to discuss, or even confirm the truth of, the greatness of the accomplishments; (3) deflecting attention from one's own contribution to the accomplishments by pointing out ways in which others helped to bring them about; (4) deflecting attention from one's responsibility for the accomplishments by pointing out contingent factors that contributed to them, e.g. factors related to good luck or good timing. This list is not meant to be exhaustive; it is meant to show that there are at least some respectable ways of de-emphasizing the magnitude or importance of one's own accomplishments without having to act in a way that is deceptive or insincere.²¹

Given the availability of these methods of downplaying the greatness of one's accomplishments and the desirability of ruling out counterexamples to cognitive or evaluative definitions of modesty, it should be evident that a satisfactory definition of modesty ought to include a condition requiring modest agents to present themselves in appropriate ways to their peers. This presentation requirement will not, by itself, be a sufficient condition for modesty. The 'behavioural account' attacked by Driver, or the 'presentation account' attacked by Schuler are straw men; they are clearly inadequate because they define modesty in terms of behaviour alone and thus leave the possibility open that someone who deceptively presents herself as modest for the sake of rewards gained by doing so will count as modest. Appropriate behaviour is a necessary condition for modesty, but other conditions are needed in order to restrict modesty to cases where an agent acts appropriately towards her peers for the right reasons. The question is what these reasons ought to be. What underlying motivations are responsible for the

21 Moreover, this list does not take into account the added benefit of using humour to deflect attention from one's accomplishments. Modest agents often employ humour to gracefully avoid discussing the greatness of their accomplishments. (E.g. 'Yes, but then running that fast isn't hard when you think everyone else in the race is chasing you.') In this respect, the social efficacy of modesty is amplified if an agent possesses a disarming sense of humour.

modest agent's disposition to de-emphasize the importance of her accomplishments?

II

Only two definitions of modesty in the recent literature require modest agents to possess dispositions to present themselves in particular ways when interacting with others. First, Daniel Statman claims that modesty is 'a disposition to avoid arrogance and boastfulness in spite of one's (justified) high self-assessment, and to be careful not to interpret one's (true) superiority as granting one extra, more permissive, moral rights.'²² This definition cannot be categorized as purely cognitive or evaluative, because it includes a disposition to avoid arrogant and boastful behaviour. It is thus a presentation definition of modesty that grounds the virtue in a certain way that agents ought to present themselves to others, even though it also includes necessary conditions that specify beliefs and attitudes that a modest agent must possess. This is a promising start; however, Statman's definition of modesty suffers from the same shortcoming as the definition proposed by Ben-Ze'ev. That is, it confuses modesty with egalitarianism in the way that it specifies the attitudes responsible for the modest agent's decision to behave modestly. The requirement that agents believe in the ultimate equality of all human beings as agents possessing the same fundamental moral rights is a plausible (if distinctly contemporary) requirement for an agent to be virtuous, but it is not a requirement that successfully captures what is distinct about the particular virtue of modesty.

The most insightful definition of modesty provided in the literature so far comes from Michael Ridge. In his definition, Ridge provides an initial necessary condition that specifies the way that modest agents are disposed to present themselves to others, but he goes on to provide two further conditions that specify why modest agents are disposed to present themselves this way. For Ridge, a person is modest only if:

- (a) She is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments and traits that are taken to entitle her to benefits.
- (b) She is so disposed at least partially in virtue of not caring too much about whether she is esteemed and partially in virtue of not caring too much about whether she gets everything to which she is entitled.

22 Statman, 434

- (c) She is so disposed at least partially in virtue of caring enough that people not overestimate her accomplishments and characteristics or her responsibility for them.²³

This is a presentation account of modesty, but it is one that prescribes a more specific set of motivating conditions than the egalitarianism proposed by Statman. In particular, the conditions in the definition presented by Ridge refer to the modest agent's attitudes about the judgments of others, i.e. the esteem she receives from them and their estimations of her accomplishments. This, I think, is a promising approach when it comes to capturing the social dimensions of modesty. However, the details of Ridge's definition of modesty are not satisfactory because they describe the primary motivation underlying the modest agent's disposition to de-emphasize her accomplishments as a kind of apathy. To avoid endorsing agents who act in a way that is self-consciously 'modest' to gain further esteem from others, Ridge assumes that authentic modesty is exemplified by agents who *do not care too much* about this kind of esteem.²⁴ On this view, a modest agent is someone who is appropriately apathetic about the esteem of her peers. She cares enough to ensure that others do not overestimate her accomplishments, but she is otherwise properly indifferent to how much others respect her for these accomplishments.

It seems to me that this characterization of modesty is too narrowly individualistic in the way that it sets an upper limit on how much modest agents can value the esteem of their peers. Ridge's definition successfully blocks the possibility of sanctioning the false modesty exhibited by agents who act appropriately towards others for the wrong reasons (i.e. by caring too much about being admired), but in doing so it gives the impression that the modest person must be someone who is dismissive of the opinions of the members of her community. Admittedly, it is virtuous to be the kind of person whose self-esteem is not excessively dependent on the opinions of others, but this virtue is best described as a type of autonomy or strength of character rather than modesty. Moreover, the notion that the ideally virtuous agent is someone who is so self-sufficient that she is free from caring about the opinions of others

23 Ridge, 281

24 See Ridge, 273. Here he is explicit about seeking a motivational profile that will distinguish modesty from false modesty. This search initially leads him to the stark proposal that modest agents not care at all whether others are impressed with her for her accomplishments, but Ridge quickly, and wisely, switches to the more moderate view that modest agents not care *too much* about whether they are esteemed by others for their accomplishments.

is, at best, a naïve individualistic myth, and, at its worst, it is a recipe for what we ordinarily think of as a personality disorder.

Of course, Ridge does not intend to give the impression that the modest person is someone who is so self-sufficient that she is dismissive of the opinions of others, and he qualifies his definition of modesty in several ways to try to avoid this result. First, and most obviously, he is careful to stipulate that a modest agent is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments because she does not care *too much* about whether she is esteemed by others. Unlike the definition of modesty proposed by G.F. Schuler, who claims that modesty is a disposition to ‘not care at all’ about the impressions of others²⁵, Ridge’s definition leaves room for agents to care some acceptable amount about the opinions of others.²⁶ Second, Ridge stipulates that the range of persons whose esteem is in question must extend over those whose opinion the agent respects. The modest agent, according to Ridge, cannot be modest simply in virtue of having contempt for everyone else. She must ‘not care too much’ about being esteemed by people whom she respects.²⁷

These two qualifications help prevent Ridge’s definition of modesty from giving the impression that a modest agent is someone who is apathetic about, if not disturbingly insensitive to, the esteem of her peers. Nevertheless, the characteristic of not caring too much about the esteem of others is still too broad to capture what is specifically valuable about modesty. It may be the case that, with the preceding qualifications, the conditions suggested by Ridge are sufficient to ensure that an agent is modest, but it is not obvious that these conditions are necessary for an agent to be modest. For example, suppose that Martha is someone who cares deeply about the esteem of her peers. She deeply respects (at least

25 Note that this is Schuler’s more recent definition of modesty, from ‘Why IS Modesty a Virtue?’ In this updated definition of modesty, Schuler moves to the more rigid claim that modest agents must not care *at all* about the impressions of others, whereas his earlier definition in ‘Why Modesty is a Virtue’ generally states that a modest agent must not care about these impressions. Schuler updates his definition in this way to avoid the counterexample of a person who does not care about the impressions of others after taking into account independent factors like not respecting one’s peers.

26 Ridge also distinguishes his account of modesty from Schuler’s earlier view by rejecting what he calls the ‘no-desert thesis,’ which is the claim that nobody really deserves credit for their accomplishments or their abilities. Schuler originally argued that modesty’s value is justified by the fact that the desire to be given credit for one’s accomplishments is illegitimate considering the genetic and cultural circumstances for which we are not responsible. He has since recanted this claim in ‘Why IS Modesty a Virtue?’

27 See Ridge, 275-6.

a high percentage of) the members of her community and it matters a great deal to her that others respect her as well. She is not a slave to their wishes — she exhibits a more than adequate level of autonomy and individual self esteem — but it would be very disappointing to her if others did not hold her in high regard. Thus Martha works hard to be a good person and to live up to the respected opinions of others. Is Martha therefore disqualified from being modest because of her high regard for the opinions of others? It would seem not. Instead, it seems at least possible that Martha can be disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments and yet be so disposed for reasons that are not based on a self-serving desire to appear modest. In other words, she might care deeply about the esteem of her peers without this concern acting as the only motivation responsible for her disposition to de-emphasize her accomplishments.

Curiously, Ridge himself seems to recognize this point, because he also qualifies his definition of modesty by noting that his quantitative characterization of ‘not caring too much’ should not be taken too literally. He claims that this characterization should instead be read as ‘indicating both that the intensity of one’s desire falls within a vaguely defined range and that one’s reasons for one’s desire (assuming one has reasons for it) must be of the right sort, where this will also be left somewhat unspecified.’²⁸ The only direction the reader is given here is that caring about the esteem of others because it is a sign that one is doing good work is an acceptable sort of desire for the modest person to have, whereas caring about whether one is esteemed because one thinks oneself to be worthless unless others say otherwise is not an appropriate sort of desire for the modest person to have. A complex range of desires in between these examples is presumed, and Ridge is committed to the idea that there are qualitative differences between these desires that determine whether they are acceptable motives for the modest person’s disposition to de-emphasize her accomplishments.

Ridge is correct to note that modesty is defined by more than a purely quantitative measure of how much an agent is (un)interested in the esteem of her peers. What is not clear is what is gained by retaining the quantitative language in his definition once he has included a qualification that works so explicitly against this language. As arcane as the profession of academic philosophy may have become, it is odd for any of us to present a very specific set of necessary conditions and then state that one of these conditions not be taken too literally. If our description of modesty succeeds only by making qualifications that allude to an

28 Ridge, 276-7

unspecified range of the right kind of reasons for an agent to care about the esteem of others, then it has failed to pinpoint what is unique about the virtue and the best course of action is to continue searching for a way to identify this range of reasons and specifically capture the set of motivations that lead modest agents to care about the esteem of others in an appropriate manner. To avoid this next step is to fall into the same trap as settling for the definitions of modesty provided by Statman and Ben-Zeev, i.e. the trap of remaining satisfied with a definition of modesty that draws attention to something interesting about virtuous agents without identifying what is unique about the virtue of modesty. Thus, Ridge's definition of modesty is suggestive but inadequate. Moreover, the impression that is created by the quantitative elements of his definition is sufficiently misleading that it seems better to press on and try to identify the set of motives that are specially relevant to exhibiting modesty.

III

At this point, I have (rather immodestly) claimed that all previous attempts to define the virtue of modesty fail. However, I think each one of these attempts to define the virtue contains an important insight that ought to be retained. Thus, in this third section of the paper I will present a definition of modesty designed to pinpoint the essential features of the virtue while preserving the insights of previous definitions. For example, Flanagan is certainly correct to think that part of modesty includes a form of non-overestimation of one's talents and accomplishments. He is wrong to think that modesty consists entirely in a cognitive form of non-overestimation, but the underlying insight of his definition is nevertheless worth retaining. Driver is also correct to think that social consequences are critically important to modesty's moral value, and Ridge is correct to think that modesty involves a disposition to present oneself in particular ways towards others. One need not agree with their respective definitions of modesty to recognize that they have identified important features of the virtue.

The most important of these features of modesty can be found in the egalitarian positions defended by Statman and Ben-Zeev. This is the idea that the modest person is someone who *keeps the significance of her accomplishments in perspective* compared to other valued goods or principles. For the egalitarian conception of modesty, the relevant comparison is between the significance of one's accomplishments and the fundamental equality of all human beings — a comparison that, I have argued, falls short of identifying what is unique about modesty. However, the general thesis that modesty is a matter of keeping the

significance of one's accomplishments in perspective can be separated from this egalitarian comparison.²⁹

The comparison I favour is one between the significance of one's accomplishments and the welfare of others. Generally speaking, I believe that a modest person is someone who keeps the significance of her talents and accomplishments in perspective in the sense that she places a higher priority on the welfare of other agents compared to the priority she places on having her accomplishments recognized by others. Specifically, I propose that an agent is modest if and only if:

1. She is disposed to de-emphasize (i.e. downplay, deflect attention from or simply avoid drawing attention to) the magnitude and importance of her natural talents, accomplishments and other traits thought to merit esteem from one's peers.
2. She is so disposed at least partly in virtue of caring that people not overestimate the magnitude or the importance of her natural talents, accomplishments, etc. or her responsibility for them.
3. She is so disposed at least partly in virtue of caring more about not jeopardizing the welfare of others (i.e. not inviting negative emotional reactions to comparative judgments about talents, accomplishments, etc.) than she cares about the esteem she might receive from others because of her natural talents, accomplishments, etc. or her responsibility for them.

To defend this definition of modesty, I will emphasize some of its important features and try to demonstrate that it is capable of capturing

29 In fact, Thomas Hurka presents a definition of modesty that conforms to the general thesis that modesty is a matter of keeping one's accomplishments in perspective. Hurka claims that modesty 'involves not taking much more pleasure in one's own achievements and virtues than in the similar merits of others' (*Virtues and Vices* [Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001], 110). His interest in modesty is to highlight the fact that it is a virtue of proportion and to show that virtues of this kind support his unique, recursive account of goodness and virtue. However, within the terms of Hurka's recursive framework, modesty can be viewed as having a general structure that consists in keeping one's accomplishments in perspective by appropriately balancing their significance against the significance of similar accomplishments achieved by others. My own view is that Hurka has, like Statman and Ben-Ze'ev, not specified the correct basis of comparison for modesty. Nevertheless, he has accurately identified the fact that modesty is a virtue that is constituted by placing an appropriate amount of significance on one's own accomplishments compared to other goods or principles.

our considered intuitions about modest agents. To begin, it is worth comparing this definition to its rivals.

First, the definition of modesty that I recommend does not require modest agents to underestimate their self-worth, so it avoids the problems that arise for Driver's claim that ignorance is necessary to exhibit the virtue of modesty. A modest agent can, on my view, have an accurate understanding of her talents, accomplishments and self-worth, as long as she does not allow others to overestimate these qualities and she is disposed to de-emphasize their importance to avoid the harms that may be created for others if the greatness of her accomplishments were to be publicly recognized. Yet, my view *allows* modest agents to underestimate their self-worth, even if it does not require this possibility as a precondition for the virtue. This is as it should be. One might suffer from epistemic defect and still have the appropriate disposition and related motivations to be a modest agent. If Paul chronically underestimates the magnitude of his accomplishments, despite evidence to the contrary, then his vice is ignorance. Yet he might still be modest if he has a disposition, and the proper motivations, to de-emphasize his underestimated opinion of himself. Thus, underestimation is compatible with modesty even if it is not a necessary component of the virtue.³⁰

30 Although this is a departure from Driver's view, there are two reasons why she could adopt my definition of modesty without compromising her philosophical interests in the virtue. First, my definition of modesty reflects the fact that the social consequences of the virtue are responsible for its moral value. My definition is, in this respect, nicely suited to Driver's consequentialist account of the virtues. (Note, however, that my definition of modesty is not limited to a consequentialist perspective. One can adopt my definition as long as one's preferred ethical theory recognizes that the social consequences of modesty are vital to its moral value, and this condition is consistent with several non-consequentialist theories, e.g. a Kantian deontology in which modesty is an imperfect duty one owes to others because it promotes social harmony and thereby fosters conditions that are conducive to other rational agents being able to realize their autonomy. C.f. *The Doctrine of Virtue*, part II, chapter I, section II, where Kant asserts that 'willing restriction of one's self-love in view of the self-love of others, is called *modesty*' (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor, ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996], 209). Second, my definition of modesty is sufficient for Driver to strike the blow she desires against the Aristotelian claim that virtuous action must be performed with an awareness of why the action is virtuous. As Driver notes, as long as it is *possible* for an agent to be unknowingly modest, then Driver has the counterexample she needs for her argument to succeed (*Uneasy Virtue*, 17, 24 and 41). This is possible, according to my definition of modesty, because all three of the conditions in the definition can be met without the agent in question being aware that she is motivated in the relevant ways for her to be modest. This would be an unusual case, since most modest agents could, if asked, identify the motivations responsible for their dispositions to de-emphasize her accomplishments even if the agents had

Next, the definition of modesty I propose requires non-overestimation in the sense that it requires modest agents to care that they not be overestimated by others, but unlike Flanagan's view it does not require an epistemic type of non-overestimation. As a result, my definition allows modest agents to overestimate their accomplishments. Just as with underestimation, this is as it should be. An agent can be mistaken about the greatness of her accomplishments and still be modest if she is appropriately disposed to de-emphasize the greatness of her accomplishments. If an agent holds an inflated view of herself due to some epistemic defect, then this person is imperceptive or lacking in good judgment, but she might still be modest in a legitimately virtuous sense. Imagine that Paula believes that she is the best piano player at her school, and her peers regularly tell her that this is true. If Paula corrects them if they, in her opinion, overestimate her piano skills and she deflects attention away from the greatness of these skills in order to avoid making others jealous, then she could very well be modest even if, unbeknownst to her and her peers, someone else at school is actually a much better piano player.

But what if an agent *chronically* overestimates her talents or accomplishments in spite of available evidence? Paula seems blameless in a way that someone who routinely ignores available evidence does not. Is the latter case not incompatible with modesty? If an agent's epistemic defect persists in the face of available evidence, we ought to inquire further about why this occurs. The most common case is one in which the agent's thirst for recognition overpowers her judgment. In such cases, it is likely that the agent's thirst for recognition will also overpower her interest in preventing others from overestimating her accomplishments and her interest in not bringing harm to others. Ordinary cases of chronic overestimation will therefore fail to qualify as examples of modesty according to my definition because of conditions two and three.

This leaves the rare and peculiar case in which an agent chronically overestimates her accomplishments despite evidence to the contrary and yet still manages to fulfill all three conditions of my definition of modesty. This is a strange case but not an impossible one. However, if we imagine a case of this kind then I believe it is reasonable to bite the bullet and accept that the agent is modest but suffering from an unusual

not previously been aware of these motivations. Yet continuous ignorance of one's own motivations is not inconceivable. Hence, my definition of modesty recognizes the possibility that an agent can be modest while being either temporarily or continuously unaware of her own modesty, and this makes it possible for Driver to adopt my definition of modesty without undermining her thesis that virtue need not require the awareness of Aristotelian practical wisdom.

epistemic defect. Such a person will exhibit the vice of inadequate self-knowledge, but she could exhibit the virtue of modesty. For example, if Jill is genuinely disposed to deflect attention from her accomplishments because she cares that others not overestimate their greatness and she will not risk harming others by seeking public recognition of her accomplishments, then it is plausible to think that she is a genuinely modest person *even if* it is oddly the case that she is vulnerable to persistent delusions of grandeur.

Finally, compared to the definition of modesty presented by Ridge, the definition I propose locates the source of modest behaviour in a motivation to care about the esteem of others in a particular qualitative manner as well as a quantitative amount. The modest agent is someone who does not care *too much* about the esteem of others in the sense that she cannot value this esteem any more than is compatible with her placing a higher value on the welfare of others. But this specific way in which the modest agent cannot care too much about the esteem of others indicates that she is motivated in a particular *qualitative* way to accept an upper limit on her desire for esteem instead of being broadly indifferent to receiving this esteem from her peers. Thus, unlike the account of modesty provided by Ridge, the definition I propose requires that the behaviour of modest agents be grounded in a specific motivation that (a) does not lead to the impression that modesty consists of a kind of apathy about the esteem of one's peers and (b) does not presuppose any absolute maximum on the esteem that agents can desire from others. It is possible, on my view, for a modest agent to care a great deal about the esteem of others as long as she does not care about this esteem more than she cares about the welfare of others. Apart from these differences, the definition of modesty that I propose is similar to the definition defended by Ridge. In fact, considering Ridge's efforts to qualify his definition so that it will be interpreted properly, one might view the definition I propose as a friendly amendment to his position since my definition retains the same presentation-based structure.³¹

31 Ridge, of course, may not see my proposal as a friendly amendment. Despite the similarity between our definitions, there is a difference in the way that each view deals with the problem of false modesty. As we have seen, Ridge's definition of modesty is specifically designed to exclude examples of what he considers to be paradigmatic examples of false modesty: cases of agents who are motivated to act 'modestly' because they want others to think of them as modest and thereby be even further impressed. By seeking to rule out all examples of this kind, Ridge sets up his definition of modesty so that any case where an agent behaves in a seemingly modest way but cares 'too much' about the esteem of others is a case of false modesty. By contrast, one can be modest, according to my definition of modesty, while acting to impress others as long as this is not the sole motivation for one's

IV

In this last section of the paper, I will conclude by identifying other noteworthy features of the definition of modesty that I propose. My hope is that reflection on these features will add to the definition's plausibility and emphasize certain facets of the virtue that are not always appreciated.

To begin, if I am correct then modesty is the virtue of keeping one's talents and accomplishments in perspective both in the sense that (a) one understands that the desire for esteem from others is not important enough to allow overestimations of one's talents and accomplishments to persist uncorrected, and (b) one is sensitive to the fact the desire for esteem from others is not as important as preventing the harm that may be created for these agents if the magnitude or importance of one's talents and accomplishments were to be publicly recognized. I have been emphasizing the latter of these two components of modesty, as I understand it, because the former is uncontroversial and it is the latter that is unique to my definition of the virtue. However, both components are important for a complete characterization of modesty as I define it.

This distinction between the different components of modesty is significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that modesty is partly grounded in a commitment to *justice* and partly grounded in a commitment to *beneficence*. The modest agent is concerned to not reap the unjust rewards that result from having her accomplishments overesti-

modest behaviour. Thus, the key difference between Ridge's position and my own is that I do not automatically rule out cases where agents self-consciously attempt to appear modest to receive esteem from their peers. In most cases, a modest agent will not seek to appear modest to others. (In fact, it is interesting to note that exemplary instances of modesty will go unnoticed, since they involve de-emphasizing one's accomplishments without inviting further admiration that would, in turn, also need to be de-emphasized. False modesty, by comparison, normally requires that others notice one's attempts to de-emphasize one's accomplishments.) However, as long as seeking to appear modest is not the *only* motivation responsible for an agent's disposition to de-emphasize her accomplishments, then it is, I believe, still possible for her to be genuinely modest. As I understand it, false modesty necessarily involves *deception* in the form of hidden, usually selfish, motivations that fill in for the proper motivations of a modest agent. The corrupt element of Ridge's paradigmatic cases of false modesty is not, in itself, the fact that agents behave 'modestly' to receive praise from their peers. What is corrupt about these cases is the insincerity on the part of agents who behave in ways that seem modest for no other reason than to gain further respect from others. It may be true that all cases of false modesty are cases in which agents are interested in eliciting praise from others, but it is the deceptive nature of their lack of any other reasons for their behaviour that is responsible for these agents being falsely modest.

mated, but she is also concerned to prevent the harms potentially created for others if even her accurately estimated accomplishments are publicly acknowledged. The former concern is a matter of justice; the latter concern is one of beneficence. This feature of modesty is, in itself, worthy of note, but it also points to a second reason why the distinction above is significant. This is the fact that the two different concerns embedded within the structure of modesty are indicative of an ongoing disagreement about how much of the behaviour we commonly describe as modest ought to be included within the more narrow scope of modesty as a virtue.

For some, the virtue of modesty should not extend beyond a disposition to correct overestimations of one's talents and accomplishments. This minimalist position can take the form of Flanagan's disposition to avoid overestimations of one's own self-worth or it can take the form of a disposition to correct overestimations of one's accomplishments by others. The shared characteristic of these minimalist accounts of modesty is the fact that they do not include a disposition to deflect attention from the magnitude or importance of *accurate* estimations of the agent's accomplishments. Thus, they will accept something similar to condition two of my definition of modesty but not condition three. Proponents of this minimalism can accept that common usage of the term modesty extends beyond this restricted scope, but they claim that only a minimalist conception of modesty ought to properly be thought of as a virtue. They see nothing praiseworthy about attempting to interfere with the truth, so they maintain that we are simply mistaken when we describe those who deflect attention from accurate representations of their accomplishments as modest in a virtuous sense.

Though I disagree with this minimalist conception of modesty, I consider it to be a plausible alternative. My disagreement rests on the fact that I believe this minimalism underestimates the social benefits of de-emphasizing accurate representations of agents' accomplishments and the fact that I think there are permissible ways to deflect attention from one's accomplishments without unlawfully distorting the truth. However, I will not argue any further for these claims. My aim here is only to point out that the disagreement between minimalist and more expansive interpretations of modesty is, in part, grounded in an underlying disagreement about the scope of our moral obligations to others, i.e. the question of whether these obligations extend beyond the limits of justice and into the realm of beneficence.

Another feature of my definition of modesty is that it suggests a unique continuity between the current sense of modesty and other senses, such as sexual modesty and the religious concept of humility. To begin with the latter, we can view religious humility as a form of modesty exemplified by an agent who avoids drawing attention to the

greatness of her accomplishments in order to avoid doing injustice or harm to God. The harms at stake for God will of course be different than those at stake for humans, but the structure of the virtue remains the same. According to some religious conceptions of humility, humans are expected to recognize their vastly inferior status compared to God. Displays of pride on our part constitute failures to appreciate just how trivial our accomplishments are compared to those of God, and they can be said to cause injury to God in the form of insult and betrayal. Conversely, humble human beings avoid drawing attention to their accomplishments because they know that their desire for public recognition is not nearly as important as refraining from offending God. Humility and modesty might therefore share an underlying structure. The relationship between a human and God is different than the corresponding relationship between humans, but in both cases modesty might be said to involve keeping one's accomplishments in perspective and de-emphasizing their importance to avoid risking injustice or injury to other individuals.³²

In the case of sexual modesty, the relevant social relationship can be between God and humans, but I will focus on instances of sexual modesty in a strictly human context to avoid overlap with humility. On my view, sexual modesty is a special case of ordinary modesty in which the harm at stake is distress in the form of prim outrage or unwelcome sexual temptation. If an agent is sexually modest, then she de-emphasizes her talents, physical attributes and accomplishments related to sex in order to avoid causing harm to those who find displays of sexual talent or accomplishment distressing. In a sense, the sexually modest agent is someone who keeps the importance of her sexual attributes in perspective by not seeking public recognition for these attributes at the expense of the welfare of others. Again, we see a shared underlying structure compared to the ordinary sense of modesty — one that is not possible for other definitions of modesty.

Sexual modesty, however, reveals an important difficulty for any interpretation of modesty that considers it to be a virtue. The difficulty concerns social circumstances in which modesty contributes to existing injustices by placing disproportionate burdens on some groups of

32 There is one important complication for this connection between modesty and humility. This is the fact that a modest agent can, on my view, privately hold an overstated conception of herself but publicly deflect attention from her accomplishments, whereas there is no parallel possibility for humility. This is a curious result, but it is explained by the fact that the relevant social environment for humility includes one's private thoughts since these thoughts cannot be shielded from the mind of God.

agents compared to others. The obvious example is that in many cultures the expectations of sexual modesty are disproportionately placed upon women compared to men.³³ In this situation, the continued promotion of sexual modesty will perpetuate the injustice of these unequal social expectations. Moreover, sexual modesty provides an especially conspicuous example of what is a more general phenomenon. In a patriarchal society, it is likely that women will be expected to de-emphasize their accomplishments to a greater extent than men, and deviations from these expectations, in the form of what will be considered immodest behaviour from women, will likely be interpreted as more offensive to others in the community than similar transgressions committed by men. For example, if June is an excellent 'stay-at-home' mother but tends to deflect attention from her accomplishments by making statements like, 'Oh, my work isn't that important; it's not as if I'm a big, important rocket scientist or anything,' then considering her modesty to be a virtue risks perpetuating unjust standards regarding the importance of labour that is more commonly performed by women. Furthermore, if June *is* a big, important rocket scientist, then it is more likely that honest statements of her talents will be interpreted as immodest compared to identical statements made by her male colleagues.³⁴

One way to deal with these examples would be to concede that modesty is not a virtuous character trait for June and other agents in similar circumstances. However, this implies that otherwise virtuous character traits are not morally valuable when possessed by agents who will contribute to existing injustices if they exhibit these traits. This is, I think, too strong a condition — one that is, in a way, punitive to the agents in question by denying that they exhibit virtue simply because they are, through no fault of their own, in special circumstances in which

33 This asymmetry is depicted with unsettling acuity by Hume in Book III of the *Treatise*. (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 364-6.) Hume claims that the asymmetry is explained by the importance of guaranteed paternity for the socialization of children and thus for the general public good. For a description of how asymmetric sexual modesty and chastity are, for better or worse, entirely representative of Hume's account of artificial virtues, see Ann Levey, 'Under Constraint: Chastity and Modesty in Hume' *Hume Studies* 23 (1997) 213-26.

34 I take it that recognition of this type of injustice is one of the motivations for proposals to sort classrooms according to gender in primary and secondary level education. Studies seem to indicate that girls learn more effectively in all-girl classrooms, and these results can be explained, in part, by the hypothesis that girls are more comfortable participating in an all-girl environment because this environment decreases the 'normal' expectations in mixed classrooms for girls to avoid drawing attention to their talents.

normally virtuous character traits perpetuate injustice. I prefer to deal with examples like June by maintaining that these agents are modest in a virtuous sense while noting that the importance of securing justice for the members of a community is far greater than the importance of exhibiting modesty. In other words, I believe it is better to bite the bullet and maintain that June is modest but allow no room for complacency about the moral status of her circumstances on the whole.

However, I will not defend my preferred strategy for dealing with cases like June here. To do so would involve delving into the complicated task of specifying a baseline set of 'ordinary' social circumstances in which the virtues systematically promote human flourishing. My aim here is only to acknowledge that the difficulty exists for any account of modesty that considers it a virtue. It may seem as if this difficulty constitutes a special problem for my account of modesty, since I am committed to the claim that it is the social dimensions of modesty that are vital to its moral value, and it is these social dimensions of modesty that are responsible for June's continued oppression. But it is hopefully clear that my definition is only illuminating a challenge that exists for any plausible account of modesty. Examples like June represent unavoidable tests for our views about the relation between individual virtues and the conditions of social justice. If recognizing the social dimensions of modesty helps to bring these tests to light, then seeing them for what they are ought to count in favour of a socially informed account of the virtue.³⁵

The last noteworthy feature of my definition of modesty that I will identify is the way in which it handles specific instances where modesty seems inappropriate. There are some situations in which modesty is either not necessary or actively discouraged, e.g. job interviews, political campaigns, grant applications and interactions between close friends or between children and their parents.³⁶ How should an account of mod-

35 This tricky relation between virtue and social justice is not limited to modesty. For example, courage is a virtue that might be said to exacerbate the injustice of class structure in modern societies, since the options available to low-income persons are limited in ways that create a situation where the possession of courage leads to disproportionately higher risks for those who find it necessary to serve in the armed forces in order to finance their education or simply to find employment.

36 Another exception was suggested to me by an anonymous referee: suppose Bob believes that if others do not esteem him enough he will become depressed and consequently fail to complete his life work of, say, curing cancer. Bob does not care about esteem for its own sake; he instead cares about esteem merely as a necessary condition for his own happiness, which he cares about only as a means of promoting the welfare of others. This is an especially curious case where it would be better for Bob to stop being modest (if his character is flexible enough to allow him to

esty, understood as a virtue, handle cases of this kind? There are two foremost ways to do so. First, one's definition of modesty can identify the virtue as a broad character trait while one concedes that there are special cases where this broad disposition does not exhibit the qualities that make the character trait morally valuable on the whole. This option considers virtues to be general character traits that are defined according to their overall systematic effects, so it permits individual cases where the character of a virtuous agent leads to actions that are not morally praiseworthy. This is the option I endorse in my definition of modesty.

The second option is to design one's definition of modesty so that it specifies an infallible standard according to which a virtuous agent, in any particular situation, cannot possibly act in ways that are not morally praiseworthy. This option is more conducive to a traditional Aristotelian conception of the virtues in which virtuous action involves the correct application of practical reason and each moral virtue is a mean between extremes of excess and defect. If modesty involves just the right amount of either minimizing or publicizing one's accomplishments, then a modest agent will possess the ideal attitudes and beliefs for each specific situation and act accordingly.³⁷

Again, I will not provide a detailed argument for my preferred approach here. Let me, however, present two points in its defense. First, the advantage of defining modesty as a broad but fallible character trait is that this option preserves ordinary language use, e.g. when a mother protests her daughter's reluctance to speak of her accomplishments by

do so). As I shall argue, however, it is a sufficiently unusual case to not lead us to rethink whether we ought to promote modesty as a *generally* praiseworthy trait for humans to possess in light of its normally reliable ability to promote harmonious social interaction.

37 Note that by referring to a traditional Aristotelian conception of the virtues I do not mean to imply that it includes the virtue of modesty. Quite the reverse: Aristotle's account of the virtues of character contains no mention whatsoever of modesty. One might even think that Aristotle's description of magnanimity implies that a contemporary interpretation of his work endorses nothing beyond the virtue of not overestimating or underestimating one's self worth. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin [Indianapolis: Hackett 1985], 97-105). Yet there are sections within this account of magnanimity that suggest a more complex relationship between Aristotle's original views and our modern opinions regarding the social dimensions of modesty. For example: 'When [the magnanimous person] meets people with good fortune or a reputation for worth, he displays his greatness, since superiority over them is difficult and impressive, and there is nothing ignoble in trying to be impressive with them. But when he meets ordinary people he is moderate, since superiority over them is easy, and an attempt to be impressive among inferiors is as vulgar as a display of strength against the weak' (102).

saying, 'Oh, don't be so modest.' Statements of this kind are not intelligible if one holds an infallible definition of modesty, whereas the strategy I favour allows for the possibility of modest agents who possess character traits that are, in general, morally valuable even if these traits are sufficiently rigid to give rise to situations where they lead to ineffective actions. Second, my definition of modesty specifies that modest agents are disposed to de-emphasize their accomplishments because they do not want to jeopardize the welfare of others; thus, it is reasonable to think that if their character traits are not overly rigid then a trait based on this motivation will allow modest agents to adjust to exactly those circumstances like interacting with proud mothers, i.e. circumstances where emphasizing one's accomplishments will not jeopardize anyone's welfare.³⁸

Whatever strategy one prefers to deal with exceptional cases where modesty is not appropriate, I want to emphasize the fact that my definition of modesty is especially well suited to explaining *why* these cases are exceptions where the disposition to de-emphasize one's accomplishments is not morally valuable. Displaying modesty in the presence of friends, family or potential employers is unnecessary *precisely because* one is expected to know that the agents with whom one is interacting will not be harmed by frank assertions about the greatness of one's accomplishments. In fact, a close friend may be hurt by an agent who acts modestly when they interact, because by acting this way the agent reveals that she does not trust her friend to be vicariously pleased by the greatness of the agent's accomplishments. The implication is instead that the agent suspects the friend of being made jealous by statements about these accomplishments. In this case, and in others, the crucial difference between when modesty is appropriate and when it is not depends on the question of whether the welfare of those affected by frank assertions of the greatness of one's accomplishments will be undermined. This is compelling evidence for the fact that the social dimensions I have identified in my definition of modesty are essential features of the virtue.

It is with this theme that I will conclude. Modesty is a more complex virtue than it initially appears, but the nature of this virtue is obscured if its social dimensions are not made to play a central role in its definition. The modest agent is one who seeks to avoid drawing at-

38 Moreover, if one prefers the option of constructing an infallible definition of modesty, then one can alter my definition so that condition one states: 'She will, *in the appropriate circumstances*, de-emphasize the magnitude and importance of her natural talents, accomplishments and other traits that are thought to merit esteem from one's peers.'

tention to the greatness of her talents and accomplishments because she cares about the social impact of her desire for public recognition. This aspect of modesty has been overlooked because of the tendency to disregard the modest agent's social interests for fear of endorsing false modesty, but there is nothing 'false' about a concern for justice and the welfare of other members of one's community. The modest agent is disposed to de-emphasize the greatness of her accomplishments for reasons that are sincere and not to be confused with the self-serving desire to receive further admiration. Thus, modesty is compatible with honest agents who care about the impact of their actions on others. It is a virtue that human agents ought to exhibit because it promotes social harmony among those with a capacity to be harmed by public acknowledgement of the superior natural talents and accomplishments of some agents compared to others. It is, in this respect, a distinctly human virtue — one that is presumably not applicable to ideal agents who lack the insecurities responsible for being hurt by public assertions of comparative greatness. For agents like us, however, it is a virtue well worth endorsing.³⁹

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