Modesty as a Virtue

A number of character traits are intuitively thought to be virtues but upon analysis can seem worthless or downright bad.[1] For example, some accounts of tolerance suggest that Neville Chamberlain was a model of tolerance, but he makes a poor poster-child for the virtuousness of that trait.[2] Modesty is such a virtue; in spite of considerable philosophical attention, a tenable analysis has yet to be articulated. Otherwise tempting accounts of modesty suggest that it essentially involves ignorance or low self-esteem, straining attempts to see it as a virtue. Other accounts are unable to distinguish genuine modesty from false modesty, painting the person who insincerely remarks, "Aw shucks, it was nothing," as a paradigm of modesty. I defend an account of modesty that explains its virtuousness. I proceed by canvassing the most attractive alternatives, and in light of their relative merits develop my own account.

I

> Things and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be: why then should we desire to be deceived?
> -Bishop Joseph Butler

One might suppose that to say a person is modest is to say that she regards her accomplishments as not being too significant in some regard. One way of developing this idea is to see underestimating one's accomplishments as essential to modesty.[3] This sort of account makes it unclear why modesty is a virtue.[4] For on the underestimation account modesty essentially involves ignorance. One might argue that such ignorance may still count as a virtue because of the way in which it alleviates destructively competitive emotions like jealousy and envy.[5] However, the fact that a trait typically alleviates competitive emotions does not entail that it is a virtue. For example, obsequiousness may

reduce such emotions, but hardly thereby counts as a virtue.[6] Further, since underestimation *essentially* involves ignorance but only *contingently* alleviates jealousy, it is especially hard to see why it should be thought to be a virtue. Also, underestimation is also contingently, and perhaps more reliably, correlated with low self-esteem, hardly making it a paradigm of virtue.

We might, instead allow that the modest person may have an accurate view of her accomplishments, but require that at any rate she not overestimate them.[7] In fact, though, nonoverestimation is not necessary for modesty. Imagine whomever you consider to be a paradigm of modesty. Now imagine that this person has in some way overestimated her accomplishments. For example, suppose she falsely believes that her work as a missionary has saved countless souls. The fact that she has these false religious beliefs *may* suggest that she suffers from some vice, perhaps naïveté, but it does not entail that she lacks modesty, or even that she lacks it to a degree. However, if not overestimating the significance of your accomplishments was necessary for counting as modest, such a person would thereby not count as modest. So nonoverestimation is not, strictly speaking, necessary for modesty.

However, this may misrepresent the guiding idea behind the nonoverestimation account. The real insight of that account might be that immodesty entails that one overestimates one's accomplishments because one has a flawed moral theory. This would in some ways be a more plausible version of the nonoverestimation account. However, there are all sorts of ways in which one might overestimate one's accomplishments because of a flawed moral theory without intuitively being immodest. If, for example, I overestimate my artistic accomplishments because I mistakenly think that beauty is good

as an end, whereas (let us suppose) it is only good as a means, it would not follow that I am immodest. It might be argued that while not any old error in one's moral theory is sufficient for immodesty, a certain kind of error underwriting overestimation is sufficient. Here the nonoverestimation account might join with the view, defended by both Aaron Ben-Ze'ev and Daniel Statman, that a necessary condition for one's being modest is that one be a certain kind of egalitarian.[8] After all, the immodest person typically thinks she is better than those around her. So perhaps we should require only that a modest person not overestimate her accomplishments because of her rejection of egalitarianism.[9]

Insofar as egalitarianism is a plausible moral view, this account of modesty would have an easy time explaining why that trait is virtuous. The danger is that the account has simply changed the subject from modesty to egalitarianism. Ben-Ze'ev argues that being an egalitarian is necessary and sufficient for being modest. However, being an egalitarian is compatible with being a braggart, for one might emphasize one's own accomplishments while realizing one's fundamental worth is no greater than anyone else's. So being an egalitarian is not sufficient for modesty. Nor is it necessary. Imagine someone who rejects egalitarianism, and thinks that some human beings are *fundamentally* more valuable than others. Perhaps this person accepts some sort of caste system. However, the person also believes that he is the kind of human being that is *least* valuable of all. It seems obvious that such a person could still count as modest. He might nonetheless overestimate his accomplishments, and do so precisely because of his rejection of egalitarianism. For he might think that his having any accomplishments at all is highly impressive against his background assumption that he is such scum. If he nonetheless does not brag about these accomplishments, even to those he considers to be

fellow-scum, nor does he care too much whether he is esteemed for those accomplishments, he is intuitively still a candidate for being modest.[10] So overestimating one's accomplishments because one rejects egalitarianism does not preclude modesty.

Undoubtedly the defender of the egalitarian account will insist that the real idea behind the account is that the modest person must not overestimate her accomplishments because she rejects egalitarianism in a way that leads her to think she is better than other people. In that case, the person who internalizes his oppression is no counterexample to the view. Note, though, that if what is vicious about immodesty is that it is evidence that one has rejected egalitarianism then this can be just as true of someone who internalizes his oppression as it is of someone in a position of power. Intuitively, the problem with both such people is that they are elitists (though one does not deem himself to be among the elite), and not that they are immodest. For it is plausible to suppose that the disvalue of immodesty is not identical with the disvalue of elitism. I realize this is not decisive, and I shall briefly return to the nonoverestimation/egalitarianism view in section IV.

I have so far deliberately focused on whether the underestimation account or the nonoverestimation account can be seen as providing a necessary condition for someone's being modest. The question remains whether either should instead be seen as providing a sufficient, though perhaps not necessary, condition for someone's counting as modest. Understood in this way, each account entails that someone who underestimates her accomplishments is modest, as underestimation entails nonoverestimation. However, someone who underestimates her accomplishments need not be modest. Imagine someone, say Einstein, whose accomplishments are *very* significant, but who seriously underestimates them. Since the accomplishments are so great, he might still think them

very impressive. He might therefore be very boastful, constantly reminding others of his amazing accomplishments. Such a person is a paradigm of immodesty. So neither underestimation nor nonoverestimation provide a sufficient condition for modesty.

II

All modesty is false modesty; otherwise it wouldn't be modesty.
-Alan Bennett[11]

The underestimation and nonoverestimation accounts, construed as providing sufficient conditions for counting as modest, are both purely cognitive - they make whether someone counts as modest a function of what they believe. The fatal objection to these accounts, so construed, is that they are compatible with someone who is an utter braggart counting as modest. This suggests that we may do better to construe modesty as being constituted, not by what a person believes, but by how she presents herself. We might, for example, maintain that someone is modest just in case she is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments. Call this the "presentation account."[12] In my view, such an account goes wrong in maintaining that being disposed to de-emphasize one's accomplishments is sufficient for modesty. Instead, I shall argue, being disposed to de-emphasize one's accomplishments is necessary but not sufficient for modesty. In this regard, the main problem with the presentation account is that it blurs the distinction between modesty and false modesty. This charge can be understood in two ways, however. The first, if sound, would prove that having a disposition to de-emphasize your accomplishments is neither necessary nor sufficient for counting as modest. The second, if sound, shows only that such a disposition is not sufficient. It is important to notice the difference in the force of the two versions as only the second is sound.

The first version maintains that the presentation account requires that the modest person presents her accomplishments as insignificant even if she believes that they are quite significant. Hence, it entails that someone who believes her accomplishments are

significant can be modest only by being deceitful. On the plausible assumption that those who are aware of their significant accomplishments can be modest), this suggests that the account makes it impossible to explain how modesty is a virtue. However, this argument is not sound. It is crucial to distinguish two versions of the presentation account. In particular, we can understand what is involved in "de-emphasizing" one's accomplishments in a stronger and a weaker way. On the stronger interpretation, the account holds that someone is modest just in case she is disposed to make a positive effort to present herself as not being very accomplished, regardless of whether she actually is. On the weaker interpretation, by contrast, someone counts as modest just in case she is disposed not to go out of her way to emphasize her accomplishments, regardless of how accomplished she actually is, and to correct those who already have an inflated and false view of the significance of her accomplishments or of the degree to which she is responsible for those accomplishments. The objection to the presentation account currently under consideration is, I am willing to allow, sound against its stronger interpretation. It is, however, unsound against the weaker interpretation. On the weaker interpretation, the presentation account does not require a modest person who is aware of the significance of their accomplishments to be willing to deceive. A person may fail to emphasize some fact, say that he is a world-famous philosopher, without making *any* effort to get those around him to reject the proposition corresponding to that fact. To take an example close to home, the fact that John Rawls is not constantly saying things like, "So, how about that *A Theory of Justice*? I really set the world on fire with that, didn't I? I suppose I'm a historical figure..." does not mean he is trying to fool anyone.

There is, however, a second way of making out the charge that the presentation account blurs the distinction between modesty and false modesty. Suppose someone is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments in just the sense isolated by the weaker interpretation of the presentation account. Suppose, though, that the person is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments because she wants to be thought of as modest,

regardless of whether she is. The correct and intuitive thing to say about such a person is that she exhibits false modesty, rather than genuine modesty. The presentation account mistakenly entails that such a person would be genuinely modest. It is important to notice, however, that this objection shows only that a disposition to de-emphasize one's accomplishments is not sufficient for genuine modesty - it also matters *why* one is so disposed. The objection is perfectly compatible with thinking that having such a disposition is a necessary condition for counting as modest. Moreover, we have relatively strong intuitive grounds for supposing that having this disposition, as understood on the weaker interpretation of the presentation account *is* a necessary condition for counting as modest. For it is very hard to imagine how someone could clearly lack that disposition and nonetheless intuitively count as modest.

III

I have often wished I had time to cultivate modesty...But I am too busy thinking about myself.

-Dame Edith Sitwell

Having the disposition to de-emphasize one's achievements is not sufficient for being modest because someone might have the disposition merely because she wants to appear modest, but this would be a case of false modesty, rather than the genuine article. Since having this disposition is necessary, but not sufficient, for someone's being modest, there must be a way of sorting those who have this disposition but are not modest from those who have it and are. The problem of false modesty suggests a way of developing the account. To handle cases of false modesty, we might require that the modest person not only have the appropriate disposition, but have it for the right reasons, where "for the right reasons" is then glossed in a way that rules out cases of false modesty.

So we need to find a motivational profile that distinguishes modesty from false modesty. A tempting route to defining such a profile takes as its starting point the fact that those who often explicitly act under the title of modesty very often are engaging in

the behavior of a modest person just because they want others to think of them as modest, and more generally because they want others to be impressed with them. Such behavior is paradigmatic false modesty. By contrast, it might be supposed that real modesty is shown by someone who does such things but *not* because they are the modest thing to do. We might therefore hold that someone is modest only if she is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments in virtue of not caring whether others are impressed with her for her accomplishments. Indifference with respect to how others evaluate one in light of one's accomplishments will count as "the right reasons." This approach can seem especially tempting in light of G.F. Schueler's provocative (early) account of why modesty is a virtue.[13] He argues that, "in the end, it is difficult to resist the thought that if someone knew enough about how one came to produce some accomplishment...none of the essential explanatory factors would be things for which one could fairly claim any credit."[14] Philosophical reflection, one might suggest, naturally leads to the conclusion that nobody really deserves credit for anything. Call this the "no desert thesis." In light of the no desert thesis, the desire to be given credit for one's accomplishments is a desire for something one does not deserve, and suggests that one has a distorted picture of one's place. By contrast, the modest person has no desire for undeserved credit. Thus, one might infer that such a person is virtuous.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the no desert thesis is true. Even so, we still have no reason to suppose that not caring about being esteemed for one's accomplishments is a virtue. To see this clearly, we need to distinguish two reasons one might have for thinking the no desert thesis could explain this. The first reason is that the modest person knows an important truth about herself - she realizes that she deserves no credit for her accomplishments. Modesty is thus a rather deep form of self-knowledge, and hence should count as a virtue. Second, as nobody really deserves credit for their accomplishments, not caring whether one is given any such credit should count as virtuous on the grounds that one should not desire what one does not deserve.

Consider each of these reasons in turn. First, consider the appeal to self-knowledge. Suppose that concluding on the basis of a certain kind of philosophical reflection that you do not really deserve any credit for anything does count as a kind of self-knowledge. The trouble is that the relationship between not caring whether others esteem you highly for your accomplishments and this sort of self-knowledge is too contingent for this to explain the virtuousness of modesty, so understood. Lacking such a desire is neither necessary nor sufficient for this sort of self-knowledge. Someone might be indifferent as to whether others esteem her highly, *not* because she realizes that she deserves no credit, but because she sees no value in being esteemed, even if she does deserve it. The more general phenomenon of believing that you deserve something but not caring about whether you get it is common enough. For instance, I might join a club that entitles me to some free coffee; I might then deserve, and realize that I deserve, some free coffee, but since I do not really care for coffee, I would not care whether it was given to me. Indifference about whether you are esteemed for your accomplishments is hence not sufficient for the sort of self-knowledge under consideration. It is also not necessary; you could realize you do not deserve any credit but want it anyway.

Even if this sort of indifference does not entail that one has the relevant self-knowledge, there may be a contingent, but highly reliable, connection between the two. My main complaint about this suggestion is a more straightforwardly empirical one - there is no reliable connection between being indifferent toward whether you are esteemed for your accomplishments and self-knowledge. The supposition that nobody really deserves any credit for their accomplishments is still very controversial *within* analytic philosophy. Much more importantly, though, the thesis is one that very few people outside the academy accept, or would even give serious consideration. Indeed, most people would view the claim that nobody deserves any credit for any of their accomplishments as not only false, but ridiculous. There are, however, quite a few people who are indifferent as to whether they are esteemed for their accomplishments.

The assumption that many of those people have the relevant self-knowledge is highly dubious at best. More likely, they are indifferent as to whether they are esteemed for their accomplishments because they just do not care about being esteemed, regardless of whether they deserve it.

So the appeal to self-knowledge can not explain how modesty, understood as indifference as to how one is esteemed for one's accomplishments, is a virtue. Still, a second prima facie reason remains for thinking modesty, so understood, is a virtue. Assuming the no desert thesis, the modest person does not want what she does not deserve - credit for her accomplishments - and so is supposed to count as virtuous. This proposal is independent of the self-knowledge proposal, as someone might be appropriately indifferent, and hence not want what they do not deserve, even if they are under the illusion that they deserve such credit. The trouble with this proposal is that there is nothing wrong, in general, about wanting what you do not deserve - even when you realize that you do not deserve it. For example, suppose I buy a lottery ticket. I know I do not *deserve* to win the lottery - I have no entitlement to win. Still, I want to win - otherwise I would not have bought the ticket. Presumably I am not thereby lacking in virtue. So wanting what you know you do not deserve is not, in general, unvirtuous. Allowing your desire to be esteemed to become all-consuming or even strong enough to distract you from more important matters, might be unvirtuous or even vicious, but someone might have such a desire without its being so strong.

It might be objected that having such a desire, no matter how weak, involves a desire that other people have the false belief that you are worthy of esteem. On the assumption that it is vicious to desire that others have false beliefs, this might seem to salvage the account. However, this strategy overlooks the possibility that the agent may believe that she *does* deserve credit for her accomplishments. Hence, in desiring that others esteem her for those accomplishments, she need not have any desire that they have false beliefs. She will have a desire whose satisfaction, as a matter of fact (again,

assuming the "no desert thesis"), requires that others have false beliefs. So long as the agent is non-negligently unaware of this constraint on the satisfaction of her desire, it does not follow that she is vicious for so desiring.

The second problem with the indifference account is its gratuitous assumption that nobody really deserves any credit for their accomplishments. While I am not going to challenge this assumption, it should be noted that it is reasonably seen as controversial. So we should not be too confident in it even if we think it true. Given that it may turn out to be false, we have reason to look for a more secure basis for the idea that modesty is a virtue. Modesty's virtuousness should not be held hostage to the no desert thesis. Furthermore, it leaves us at a loss to explain why most people both believe that people often deserve credit for their accomplishments *and* that modesty is a virtue. Insofar as one aims to explain why ordinary folks plausibly take modesty to be a virtue, one should not rely on any recherché theories of responsibility to explain its virtuousness.

IV

He fell in love with himself at first sight and it is a passion to which he always remained faithful. Self-love seems so often unrequited.
-Anthony Powell

To be modest is to be disposed to de-emphasize your accomplishments for the right reasons. We have seen that glossing "for the right reasons" as "because one is indifferent to how one is esteemed" faces two serious objections. Still, there is something fundamentally right about this gloss. No doubt, the account goes too far in requiring that the modest person be completely indifferent as to whether she is esteemed for her accomplishments. On the other hand, the more moderate view that the modest person must not care *too much* about such esteem is plausible. Indeed, my suggestion is that this is the correct way to flesh out the "for the right reasons" clause.

It might seem on this account that someone who had utter contempt for those around her would automatically count as a paradigm of modesty. For it is precisely

because the person has such an inflated view of herself in relation to others, that she does not care at all what they think of her. This seems fairly counter-intuitive; while it is *perhaps* possible for such a person to be modest it should surely not follow that they automatically are modest precisely in virtue of their contempt for others! The crucial point about this person, though, is that she does not respect the opinions of those around her. The litmus test for whether such a person should count as modest is, in my view, whether she would care too much about whether she is esteemed for her accomplishments *by people whose opinions she respects*. The fact that she does not care at all about the esteem of those for whom she has nothing but contempt does not guarantee that the person is modest, for she might still care far too much about she is esteemed by those whose opinions she does respect. Note that a person could well care too much about this *even if* she did not happen to know of anyone else whose opinion she respected. For it could still be true of her that she cares too much that anyone whose opinion is worth respecting esteems her for her accomplishments, just as I might care too much that anyone whose opinion I respect reads my novel love it even if I know that nobody has actually read it. I might, for example, constantly worry that someone will read it and not esteem me for it. So the crucial point is that concern for whether one is esteemed must extend over people (perhaps merely possible people, in the agent's eyes) whose opinion the agent respects. If, however, the person does not care too much about whether she is esteemed even by those whose opinions she respects, then on my account the person is modest, but this does not seem to me to be an embarrassment. For it seems to me that such a person's vice is not immodesty, but conceit, where conceit is understood very roughly as having too high an opinion of oneself because one has engaged in some form of wishful thinking or another. Linguistic intuitions are not especially firm on this particular count, though, and we could simply allow that there is another sense of 'immodesty' which is equivalent with what I would prefer to call conceit. Perhaps this would be a fruitful way of developing the previously discussed

nonoverestimation/egalitarianism account. In which case, the right conclusion may be that such a person is modest in one sense but immodest in another. Since my aim here is to develop an account modesty in which modesty is a virtue that is relatively distinct from other virtues, like egalitarianism, I shall put this possibility to one side.

Return to the case of false modesty. The presentation account could not distinguish modesty from false modesty. The most plausible strategy for dealing with this worry was to require that the modest person is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments "for the right reasons." We are now in a position to articulate what the right reasons are - the person must (1) not care too much about how she is esteemed for her accomplishments and (2) care *enough* that people not overestimate her accomplishments, or her responsibility for them. On the plausible assumption that someone who wants to be seen as modest regardless of whether she is cares too much about how she is esteemed (in this case, for her modesty), the present account provides a plausible explanation of why such a person is not genuinely modest.

Three points about this proposal need to be emphasized. First, though I have put the account in terms of not caring "too much," this quantitative characterization must not be taken too literally. It is not as if all that is relevant here is the intensity of a desire, understood either in terms of motivational strength, frequency with which one thinks about the object of the desire and how one might get it, or how intensely one feels when thinking about that object. All of those considerations are relevant, but there is more to it than that. For it also matters *why* one cares whether one is esteemed for one's accomplishments. If one cares about it simply because it is a sign that others have found what is truly valuable about your work, then a moderate concern seems reasonable, simply because one should care about whether one is doing good work and therefore should care about whether the evidence suggests one is. If, however, one cares about whether one is esteemed because one is neurotic and thinks oneself to be completely worthless unless others esteem one, then in the relevant sense one cares "too much." So

the "not caring too much" characterization needs to 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. Second, the account is self-consciously *not* exclusively other-directed. My account is put in terms of, "not caring too much whether one is esteemed for one's accomplishments," and not in terms of, "not caring too much whether *others* esteem one for one's accomplishments." This is important, for it would border on paradoxical to suppose that the immodest person is essentially preoccupied with thoughts of *others*. Third, the disposition to de-emphasize one's accomplishments consists of two elements. It includes a disposition to refrain from going out of your way to stress the significance of your accomplishments, and includes a disposition to correct others if they have an inflated conception of those accomplishments (or an inflated conception of your responsibility for them). So the modest person's disposition to de-emphasize her accomplishments is partially explained by her caring enough that people not overestimate her accomplishments or responsibility for them, and is partially explained by her not caring too much whether people esteem her.

The view I am proposing fits nicely, in some respects, into a broadly Aristotelian view, according to which virtue is a mean between two extremes. The person who cares too little about whether she is esteemed for her accomplishments may lack self-esteem, while the person who cares too much is immodest. Between these extremes, we find the paradigm of a modest person, who is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments because she cares just the right amount about whether she is esteemed for them. This view helps make sense of the notion that modesty (and immodesty), like the other virtues (and vices), comes in degrees, as one's concern that one is esteemed for one's accomplishments might be a tiny bit too strong, way too strong, or anything in between.

I should emphasize, however, that the proposed view only fits nicely into the Aristotelian view *in some respects*. I was careful to say that the person who cares just the

right amount about whether she is esteemed for her accomplishments is the paradigm of a modest person, *not* that she defines what it is to be modest. In fact, my account requires that the modest person *not* care too much about whether she is esteemed for her accomplishments, rather than requiring that she care just the right amount. Hence, the person who cares too little about whether she is esteemed may still count as modest; modesty is not really a mean between two extremes, though it does essentially involve falling short of one of two extremes. This fits quite well with our common sense descriptions, as we would not in ordinary language say a person lacking self-esteem is *therefore* immodest. Rather, we might describe such a person as "too modest."[15]

One might at this point worry that I am ensuring that my account of modesty is plausible as an analysis of that character trait only at the cost of making it implausible to think it a virtue. For on my account someone with very low self-esteem might still count as modest, but such a person is not a paradigm of virtue. However, what is vicious about this person is *not* that she is modest, it is that she lacks self-esteem. It is still virtuous that she does not care *too much* about whether she is esteemed for her accomplishments - if she came to care too much about it, she would in one respect be less virtuous. What is vicious about such a person is not that she does not care too much, it is that she cares too little, and these are distinct facts about her; although the latter entails the former, the former does not entail the latter. The crucial point is that both not caring too much *and* not caring too little about whether one is esteemed are essential elements of virtues, but they are essential elements of distinct virtues - self-esteem and modesty. We should resist the tempting Aristotelian tendency to see every virtue as a mean, as doing so can blur the distinction between two virtues sharply distinguished in everyday thought.

Still, the connection with Aristotle suggests the worry that the account I have given is vacuous unless combined with some more precise account of "cares too much" For it is often thought that a serious problem with Aristotelian accounts is that all they give us are vacuous platitudes. "Care just the right amount about whether you are

esteemed for your accomplishments" is about as helpful as "Do the right thing" as a piece of moral advice. However, this indeterminacy is not a vice in the present context. For I intend to give an account of modesty's virtuousness that both fits roughly with common sense and does not depend on any particular background moral theory. One's full understanding of the virtuousness of modesty will not float free of one's more general first-order moral commitments. No doubt, a virtue theorist, a utilitarian, an ethical egoist, a deontologist, and a contractarian will all give different and competing accounts of what it is to care "too much" about how one is esteemed for one's accomplishments. Since I want my account to be neutral between such competing theoretical commitments, it is an advantage of the account that it leaves open what is to count as "too much." Furthermore, as Aristotle reminds us, we should not seek more precision in a discipline than it allows.

Finally, though, I shall not leave the account completely open-ended; our folk wisdom as to why modesty is a virtue is more determinate than that. First, it is something of a platitude to hold that one should keep one's own problems in perspective. Perhaps it is a bad thing that one is not given a certain degree of esteem for one's accomplishments. Still, in itself it is not *such* a bad thing. Particularly when one reflects upon the much more serious problems faced by so many people - starvation, political oppression, sexism, racism, etc. - the thought that it is really not that important, in itself anyway, whether one is esteemed for one's accomplishments is rightly seen as very plausible. This sort of reflection suggests it may be quite easy to care too much about not being esteemed for one's accomplishments. Giving much thought to how much one is esteemed for one's accomplishments can plausibly be seen as a sort of vicious narcissism and a lack of perspective. Second, being very concerned with how one is esteemed may *distract* one from more successfully pursuing what is genuinely valuable in itself. Worrying too much about whether one is appropriately esteemed for one's accomplishments may distract one from the value of those accomplishments considered in themselves.[16] Third, modesty may promote diversity and pluralism, which are arguably good for their own sakes as well

as their consequences.[17] For if those who are famous emphasize their accomplishments too much, it may distract us from the valuable work of others. Fourth, the considerations mobilized by Driver are important. A disposition to de-emphasize one's accomplishments explains how modesty can keep jealousy, insecurity, and other destructively competitive emotions in check.[18]

V

He's a modest little man with much to be modest about.
-Winston Churchill

So far, we seem to have established that someone is modest only if (a) she is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments, and (b) is so disposed in virtue of not caring too much about how she is esteemed for those accomplishments, and in virtue of caring enough that people not overestimate those accomplishments or her responsibility for them. At most, we have two necessary conditions for someone's counting as modest. Ultimately, I will conclude that something close to these two conditions is sufficient as well, but I am not yet in a position to draw that inference. My strategy here is to consider what I take to be the most plausible contenders for further necessary conditions and show that those conditions are not really essential to modesty. I have already considered the accuracy and underestimation requirements, and concluded that they are not really essential to modesty. There is, however, at least one more plausible candidate, or family of candidates, for an essential element of modesty that must be considered.[19]

Consider someone who has a low but accurate opinion of herself. Suppose this person neither has, nor thinks she has, any genuine accomplishments. She has done some things, but none of them were worthwhile or successful enough to warrant being thought of as genuine accomplishments. The question is whether such a person could nonetheless count as modest. One might plausibly suppose the answer to this question must be "no," on the grounds that such a person, "has nothing to be modest about."[20] The tempting suggestion would be that modesty requires both having and knowing that one has

accomplishments. This requirement is too strong, though. For intuitively someone who non-negligently believes that she has accomplished a lot can count as modest, even if she actually has no genuine accomplishments.

If this weakened requirement were plausible, another element would need to be added to my proposed analysis - someone counts as modest only if she has some accomplishments and believes those accomplishments to be genuine. However, the very reason we should allow that someone might be modest *even if* her accomplishments turned out to be hollow, also suggests that a person might be modest even if she turned out not to have any accomplishments at all, so long as she believed she had some genuine ones. For all that his been said so far, though, it could still be maintained that someone is modest only if she at least believes she has some genuine accomplishments. In fact, we should reject this even weaker constraint. Suppose someone satisfies the other criteria of our account - she is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments in virtue of caring to the right degree whether she is esteemed for those accomplishments. Now suppose that this person comes to believe that she does have some accomplishments, perhaps even that she has some genuine accomplishments. The relevant question should be, does this person at that point gain a virtue? If we accept even the weakest version of the proposed constraint, we must conclude that she has, since she will have gone from not being modest to being modest, and modesty is, we are supposing, a virtue. However, it is relatively clear that coming to have this belief will not, in itself, make one more virtuous.

The real point is that modesty fundamentally consists in being disposed (for the right reasons) to react appropriately to what, if anything, one's takes to be one's accomplishments. One may be thus disposed without actually having, or even thinking one has, any accomplishments at all, much less any genuine accomplishments. This is somewhat analogous to the way in which a person may be stranded on a desert island and still count as honest. Even though she would have "nobody to be honest with" (putting aside the possibility of self-deception), she still counts as honest so long as she is

disposed to be honest with whomever she does interact. Another useful example might be that of a person who never actually faces danger - not because he avoids it, but because he happens to live in a safe world. Such a person could nonetheless be courageous in virtue of being disposed to face danger in the appropriate way, should he ever encounter it.[21] Here it is important to distinguish two different things someone might want to analyze in reflecting on modesty. I suspect that a failure to distinguish these two possible targets of analysis that makes the "actual accomplishments" requirement seem plausible. One might want, as I do, to analyze modesty as a character trait. However, one might instead be interested in analyzing what it is for someone to act in a way that *displays* their modesty. In that context, the point that otherwise such a person would "have nothing to be modest about" is perfectly apt.

VI

Truth is rarely simple, and never pure.
-Oscar Wilde

I must now remedy an oversimplification. I have assumed to this point that modesty is characterized in terms of one's attitude to one's accomplishments. Really, though, one can be immodest about one's accomplishments *or* about characteristics, like natural or physical strength, that are not accomplishments. So perhaps we should require that the modest person not care too much about whether she is esteemed, period. In fact, though, even this requirement is not quite right. For just as one can be immodest about characteristics that are not accomplishments, one can also be immodest about those characteristics without caring too much about whether one is *esteemed* for them. Rather, one might be immodest in virtue of being too quick to press claims for whatever entitlements go along with those characteristics. Often it is useful for us to adopt policies favoring people for certain positions on the basis of traits that are not accomplishments. For example, a person's height is not plausibly thought of as an accomplishment, but it is reasonable for a basketball coach to adopt a policy of being more likely to cut shorter

players from the team where all else is equal. In such cases, one might care too much about whether one gets everything to which one is entitled by those traits, and that might lead one inappropriately to emphasize them. The person who constantly emphasizes that she is the tallest or the (naturally) strongest where those characteristics are (perhaps reasonably) associated with certain entitlements, seems to be displaying a kind of immodesty that does not necessarily involve a desire to be *esteemed* for those characteristics, as everyone may know she deserves no esteem for them. To be modest, then, a person must be disposed to de-emphasize both her accomplishments and any traits that might be taken as entitling her to special benefits.

This suggests a further explanation of why modesty is a virtue. For while it may often be good to adopt policies providing special benefits to people on the basis of certain traits, it may also be good for people with those traits not to emphasize their having them. It may be good and very important to adopt policies providing such benefits becuase of the incentives they provide. Nonetheless, it may also be good for those who have such traits very often not to press the claims to which they are entitled. Since people generally are somewhat selfish, such incentives may well be a necessary evil, but this is compatible with its being more virtuous not to go out of one's way to take advantage of those incentives.[22] For pressing such claims might be very inegalitarian, leading those with the traits to do much better on the whole than those without the traits. In this way, modesty might tend to have egalitarian consequences that are arguably good both for their own sake and for their consequences. Of course, the tendency to de-emphasize these traits can be taken too far, especially since there often may be a good reason those traits are associated with various benefits and entitlements. If, for example, a person's talent as a fighter pilot's is crucial to the success of an important mission in a just war, then the person should not de-emphasize those talents when the general is deciding who should fly that mission.[23] This, however, is just to emphasize that a person might care too little, as well as too much, as to whether she receives that to which she is entitled.

Conclusion.

In sum, then, on my account a person is modest just in case:

(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.
(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.

So understood, modesty is valuable for at least the following five reasons:

(1) It is a sign that the person keeps things in perspective, not inflating the importance of being esteemed or receiving one's entitlements.
(2) It prevents one from being too easily distracted from what is really important by an excessive concern for how one is esteemed or for receiving one's entitlements.
(3) It promotes pluralism and diversity indirectly by encouraging the work of the less famous.
(4) It keeps destructive emotions like jealousy and envy in check.
(5) It has egalitarian consequences.

In the spirit of my subject, I shall end with a caveat. My intention is to defend *an* account of modesty that makes sense of the idea that it is a virtue. For all that has been said here, there may be other useful senses of 'modesty' that also make sense of that idea.[24]

Notes

[1]For present purposes, I shall simply assume that there are character traits as traditionally conceived as durable principles of mind that influence one's action in predictable ways across a relatively wide range of contexts. For a useful discussion of recent empirical evidence and an apparently emerging consensus amongst social psychologists that there are no such traits, see Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," *Proceedings of the Aristotlelian Society* (1999) : 315-331.
[2]See *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996.
[3]Julia Driver defends such a view. Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXVI, 7 (1989): 373-84. Note that one might underestimate either (a) the impressiveness of one's accomplishments given one's circumstances, (b) the importance of one's accomplishments from some perspective or other, or (c) one's responsibility for those accomplishments. For present purposes, any one of these three would count as a form of underestimation in the relevnat sense. Thanks to Robert Almeder for helpful comments here.
[4]One might modify Driver's account, and hold that low estimation is necessary for modesty, rather than underestimation. However, this will still have the implausible consequence that someone who really is quite accomplished cannot be modest without being ignorant of their accomplishments. A similar point is made with many useful examples in the context of a discussion of arrogance by Valerie Tiberius and John Walker. See their "Arrogance," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, October, 1998, pp. 379-390.

[5]Driver, p. 379.
[6] Nor is obsequiousness a subspecies of modesty, as the former, but not the latter, essentially involves a willingness to do more or less whatever one thinks will please another.
[7]See Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXVII (1990): 420-428.
[8]Ben-Ze'ev, "The Virtue of Modesty," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993): 235-246, and Statman's "Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment," *Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 420-438).
[9] Here it is worth distinguishing versions of egalitarianism. One might be the view that nobody is fundamentally better (more worthy of what Stephen Darwall calls respect, e.g.) than anyone else. Another might be the view that while nobody deserves more than anybody else, still some people are better in some respects than others. Another might be the view that people should not, in any case, be treated differently for their accomplishments. Thanks to Robert Almeder for useful discussion.
[10]A similar charge was independently raised by A.T. Nuyen. See his, "Just Modesty," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 101-109, pp. 102-3.
[11]Thanks to G.F. Schueler for this priceless witticism, from whose article I have shamelessly lifted it.
[12]The terminology is Schueler's. See G.F. Schueler, "Why Modesty is a Virtue," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 467-458. Further references to Schueler are to this article unless otherwise noted.
[13]Schueler has since changed his view. He now thinks modesty is a virtue because her goals and purposes are"not generated from herself but from those around her," so that, "the direction of her life comes not from within herself but from others." G.F. Schueler, "Why IS Modesty a Virtue?" *Ethics*, 109, July, 1999, pp. 838-389. It is hard to see how this follows from his analysis of modesty, though. For on his account to be modest is not to care about whether people esteem her for her accomplishments, and to be immodest is to care, to some degree, about this. Prima facie, though, it seems that a person could be very self-directed and still have some concern that others esteem her for those accomplishments. For example, she might antecedently decide that a certain way of life is objectively worth living even though her peers do not recognize this. She might still lead this sort of life, knowing full well that people will not esteem her for what are, in her view, genuine accomplishments. She might still want their esteem a great deal, but care even more that she leads a valuable kind of life. In other words, her desire might lead her to try to get people to recognize what is good about her way of life, rather than modifying her way of life to suit the antecedent tastes and value judgments of her peers. It is possible to care a great deal what people think of you without letting their opinions dictate how you shall live.
[14]Schueler, p. 484.
[15] For similar reasons, I disagree with the thesis that, "it does not seem possible for someone to be both self-confident and arrogant...We believe the explanation is that self-confidence is not *simply* a matter of having an appropriately high estimation of oneself. It includes further beliefs about one's proper relations with others, and possibly behaviorial dispositions as well." (Valrie Tiberius and John Walker, "Arrogance," *American Philosphical Quarterly*, October, 1998, p. 383) Though arrogance and immodesty are distinct, there are important connections between the two. The crucial point, though, is that just as I think a modest person can lack self-esteem, I also think a self-confident person can be arrogant. Modesty and self-confidence are virtues, but having those virtues does not, in ordinary language, entail that one has self-esteem (in the case of modesty) or lacks arrogance (in the case of self-confidence). Such virtues are hence best understood *not* on the model of a mean between two extremes, but as falling short of one of the two extremes in question (too much concern for what people think of one in the case of modesty, and too little confidence in the case of self-confidence).
[16]Of course, as noted above, worrying too little about it will also be a vice - a lack of self-esteem, perhaps.
[17]Whether pluralism of the kinds in play here is good for its own sake goes beyond the present scope. That it might be good for its consequences is plausible on epistemic grounds; if we all work on the same problems with the same methodologies, we may be blind to certain kinds of mistakes, questions, or hypotheses. For a defense of epistemic pluralism along these lines, see Stephen Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 137-139.
[18]Note that my objection to Driver's analysis relied on the assumption that not encouraging those emotions is not *sufficient* for a trait's being a virtue. However, this is compatible with my allowing that reliably keeping such emotions in check is *some evidence* that a trait is a virtue.
[19]Drier, Nuyen, Schueler, and Statman all endorse some version of this candidate.

[20]Schueler, p. 472.
[21]It is important to distinguish between what an agent is now disposed to do under certain circumstances, and what *further* dispositions she is now disposed to acquire under certain circumstances. It is the former, and not the latter, that I am invoking here.
[22] Thanks to Robert Almeder for emphasizing the possible importance of such incentives.
[23] Thanks to Sean McKeever for this helpful example.
[24] Many thanks to Robert Almeder, Simon Blackburn, Julia Driver, Robin Flaig, Thomas E. Hill, Jr., William G. Lycan, Geoffery Sayre-McCord, Sean McKeever, George F. Schueler, and an anonymous referee for useful discussion of previous drafts of this paper.