

# What Is Modesty?

**Fritz Allhoff**

**Western Michigan University**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the virtue of modesty and provides an account of what it means to be modest. A good account should not only delimit the proper application of the concept, but should also capture why it is that we think that modesty is a virtue. Recent work has yielded several interesting, but flawed, accounts of modesty. Julia Driver has argued that it consists in underestimating one's self-worth, while Owen Flanagan has argued that modesty must entail an accurate— as opposed to underestimated or inflated— conception of one's self worth. Neither of these accounts provides a satisfactory characterization of modesty as a virtue. Driver leaves us wondering why modesty, understood, at least in part, as misunderstanding one's merits, should earn the status of virtue, whereas Flanagan's characterization does not adequately and uniquely pick out the concept of modesty. These criticisms have been presented by G. F. Schueler who goes on to defend the doctrine that modesty is, roughly, the lack of one's desire for other people to be impressed by one's accomplishments. My goal is to provide an account of modesty that improves upon those currently before us. My own positive account will draw off of Schueler's account as well as work done by Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriele Taylor on the moral emotion of shame.

*“Le Corbeau et Le Renard”*

Jean de La Fontaine

*Maître corbeau, sur un arbre perché,  
Tenait en son bec un fromage.  
Maître renard par l'odeur alléché,  
Lui tint à peu près ce langage:  
«Et bonjour Monsieur du Corbeau.  
Que vous êtes joli! que vous me semblez beau!  
Sans mentir, si votre ramage  
Se rapporte à votre plumage,  
Vous êtes le phénix des hôtes de ces bois»  
À ces mots le corbeau ne se sent pas de joie;*

*Et pour montrer sa belle voix,  
 Il ouvre un large bec laisse tomber sa proie.  
 Le renard s'en saisit et dit: «Mon bon Monsieur,  
 Apprenez que tout flatteur  
 Vit aux dépens de celui qui l'écoute:  
 Cette leçon vaut bien un fromage sans doute.»  
 Le corbeau honteux et confus  
 Jura mais un peu tard, qu'on ne l'y prendrait plus.<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is modesty? We have fairly solid intuitions about what constitutes instances of immodesty, yet it is hard to extract a defining, overarching principle that can be adapted to characterize modesty without being either too broad or too narrow. In La Fontaine's fable, we have a strong intuition that the crow is being immodest: he falls victim to flattery and prepares to sing in order to indulge his flatterer, letting the flattery so get to his head that he forgets about his valuable cheese. But of what does his immodesty consist? Pinning this down will require investigation.

La Fontaine's fable teaches us something important about the nature of immodesty: it is not a good thing. The crow, in his immodesty, loses his prize. But the loss need not be as concrete or material; La Fontaine merely tries to instruct us that immodesty has costs. We can certainly imagine immodesty costing far more than cheese. It can impede our ability to form deep, personal relationships or compromise our ability to function well with others, whether professionally or socially. Modesty, on the other hand, is something that is valuable, and not only because it avoids these costs, but also because it has the benefit of helping us achieve valuable ends, such as good relationships. More controversially, the value and disvalue of modesty and immodesty respectively might extend beyond instrumentality and reside intrinsically within them. In other words, we can ask the question whether modesty, in and of itself and regardless of its consequences, benefits its possessor.

The intent of this paper is to develop an account of what it means to be modest. This will be done in two stages: first, I will evaluate and criticize extant accounts and, second, I will develop my own positive account. A good account should not only delimit proper ascriptions of modesty, but it should also capture why it is that we think that modesty is a virtue. An account that fails to capture the goodness of modesty will not constitute a successful completion of the project.

The term 'modest' can be used in several senses, but what I am interested in is how it can be used to reference a particular character trait or disposition. In addition to this usage, we might talk about a modest house or a modest fortune when we pick out things that score reasonably, but not exceptionally, on some relative scale of grandeur. We can also talk about modest dress (or behavior) which points towards an observance of certain mores. This usage certainly stands in some relation to the character trait of modesty since being modest might well engender modest dress. We can easily enough note the distinction, however, by observing

that it is not inconsistent to say that an immodest person dressed modestly, even if a modest person would not willingly dress immodestly. These usages aside, my concern is with what it means to identify a person as possessing, or lacking, the virtue of modesty.

Recent work has yielded various accounts of modesty. Julia Driver has argued that it consists in underestimating one's self-worth.<sup>2</sup> But Driver's account leaves us wondering why modesty, understood, at least in part, as misunderstanding oneself, should earn the status of virtue. On her account, modesty is a form of ignorance entailing a lack of self-knowledge, and it is odd to say that this ignorance constitutes a virtue. On another account, Owen Flanagan has argued that modesty must entail an accurate, as opposed to underestimated or inflated, conception of one's self-worth.<sup>3</sup> Flanagan's characterization does not adequately and uniquely pick out the concept of modesty, but something more closely approximating self-knowledge. Finally, G. F. Schueler has advanced the position that modesty requires, roughly, lacking a desire for other people to be impressed by one's accomplishments.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that this account fails to delimit the proper scope since there are reasons other than being modest that might preclude someone from caring what others think about his accomplishments.

Critically evaluating Driver's and Flanagan's accounts of modesty will help us arrive at its true nature. By looking at their errors, we can gain insights that will allow us to properly characterize modesty, as well as understand why it should be considered a virtue. Schueler's account constructively avoids the shortcomings of Driver's and Flanagan's belief-based accounts and thereby comes closer to than its predecessors. Yet seeing the shortcomings of his account will also help establish some of the ideas that I will need for the presentation of my positive account, which will draw off of both Schueler's account and contemporary work done on the moral emotion of shame.

## 2. THE UNDERESTIMATION/IGNORANCE ACCOUNT

According to Driver, "a modest person underestimates his self-worth."<sup>5</sup> This implies that modesty pertains to what the modest person believes about his overall worth. But we can talk about modesty in other ways as well: someone can be modest about his cooking ability, modest about a first prize in the science fair, and so on. Modesty can be held with respect to not just one's overall worth, but also to individual abilities and accomplishments.<sup>6</sup> Thus the underestimation account can be better presented as follows: modesty is displayed when a person underestimates his self-worth *or* any of his abilities or accomplishments. Though Driver thinks that her account is appropriately designated the "underestimation account," it might better be called the "ignorance account" since underestimation is a form of error and, in this case, reflects a lack of self-knowledge, which is a type of ignorance.

Driver's account has some intuitive resonance. If someone continually overestimates her merits, she certainly seems to be immodest—this overestimation would bring with it the inflated ego that we at least sometimes think accompanies immodesty. Therefore, it might be plausible that modesty consists in doing the

opposite by continually underestimating one's own merits. If, for example, we (accurately and sincerely) thank an illustrious speaker for the best colloquium ever presented and he responds sincerely by saying that he thought it was merely good, but not deserving of the ascribed accolades, we may think him to be modest.<sup>7</sup>

There are two problems with Driver's account. The first, pointed out by Schueler, is that underestimation can be consistent with immodesty. Schueler asks us to imagine a gifted scientist, one who is the best of the century yet assesses himself to be only the second best. This person, though underestimating his merits, can certainly be immodest by virtue of being disposed to braggartly behavior.<sup>8</sup> Second best of the century, after all, is not so bad, and this scientist may be perfectly disposed to remind all willing listeners of his achievements. It is not contradictory to say that he has both underestimated his accomplishments yet is still immodest, which is a result that is at odds with the underestimation account.

Furthermore, the underestimation that Driver takes to be important could derive from stupidity or self-deception just as easily as it could from modesty. Underestimation therefore cannot be sufficient for the virtue of modesty since the source of that underestimation may be something far less admirable. Driver argues that modesty consists in underestimation but, since stupidity and self-deception can also yield underestimation, and since these concepts are different from modesty, she cannot be correct.<sup>9</sup> Rather, it seems more appropriate to suggest that the modest person is modest, in part, because he is accurately aware of having some talents or accomplishments, not in virtue of being ignorant of them. The person whose character we find more worthy of praise is not the one who does not know that he is talented, but the one who knows that he is and is impacted by this knowledge in the appropriate way. Furthermore, many of us have the intuition that there are modest people who do in fact have knowledge of their merits, which is precisely what Driver says is impossible.

The fact that underestimation can be consistent with immodesty and that underestimation can be produced by means we do not consider praiseworthy indicates, at a minimum, that underestimation is not a sufficient condition for modesty. Driver may retreat from her position and try to hold that it is nevertheless necessary, if not sufficient. However, this move would undermine the completeness of her account and, regardless, we shall see reasons to doubt that underestimation is even necessary at all.

In order to completely reject Driver's account, we could deny altogether that the modest person underestimates her abilities and accomplishments. The motivating factor behind this move is that modesty, properly conceived, is a virtue and her account goes a long way towards stripping modesty of the desirability that all virtues must have. Specifically, her reliance on underestimation denies modesty at least some of its sparkle since being modest would entail being mistaken about oneself. For one to be modest one's evaluation of oneself (or abilities or accomplishments) must be inaccurate; it must undervalue one's worth. The mistake is at least partially epistemic since it is produced by false beliefs and, more specifically, false beliefs about oneself. Therefore, on the underestimation account, modesty requires ignorance. This result clashes with the long held

assumption in virtue ethics that virtues are not compatible with ignorance. Since the Ancient Greeks, virtues have been regarded as a source of practical wisdom; they entail knowledge and one cannot possess the virtues without this knowledge. Driver, realizing this conflict, wants to achieve a resolution by dropping this ancient assumption rather than bringing her account in line with it. She proposes to introduce a class of virtues, including modesty, called the virtues of ignorance that are not only compatible with ignorance, but require it.<sup>10</sup>

In response, it bears notice that at least some virtues require knowledge and are therefore incompatible with ignorance; this at least shifts the burden of proof to Driver. Courage, for example, requires knowledge. Consider a soldier who, in the heat of battle, becomes disoriented and, in attempting to flee, charges right into the heart of the enemy army. His charge incites his outnumbered comrades to fight onward to victory. Has he acted bravely? Of course not: he unknowingly pushed deeper into enemy territory while, in fact, he had given into fear and resolved to flee. Ignorance of the true nature of the act precludes the soldier from displaying courage in this situation. Other virtues function in a very similar way: generosity, moderation, justice, honesty, prudence, temperance, and so on. But, granting this, what about Driver's suggestion that there exists a class of virtues, including modesty, that require ignorance? Even if many, or even most virtues require knowledge, it does not follow that all do.

Nevertheless, I think that Driver's proposal should be resisted. One reason that I laid out the example in the preceding paragraph was to accent our intuition that virtues are incompatible with ignorance; this is why her suggestion sounds so foreign to us. Virtues, understood as sources of practical wisdom, are strictly incompatible with ignorance. It is hard to understand why modesty—or the class of virtues of which it is part—should differ so dramatically from our standard conception of virtues, or else why we should adopt a heterogeneous account (i.e., virtues sometimes, but not always, require ignorance). Driver therefore has a substantial burden to overcome to convince us that any character trait based on ignorance should be considered virtuous. Virtues are the types of things that moral educators encourage people to strive for, and ignorance is certainly not such a lofty ideal.

If there is a class of virtues that requires ignorance, we can then inquire as to how this would affect the life and actions of the virtuous person. If his virtue consisted, at least in part, in his ignorance, he would then be expected to eschew knowledge or, in the case of modesty, self-knowledge whenever he was in a position to acquire it. Otherwise, it would have to be the case that the possessor of these peculiar virtues never came across the opportunities to develop knowledge or self-knowledge, in which case we could surely debate that this life would be the one constitutive of the good life. Moral education would consist, at least in part, of teaching people to misunderstand themselves and, furthermore, to resist at least some opportunities for clarification; such consequences follow from an account of modesty that hangs on ignorance. If, for example, a wise man were to walk down the street teaching others of their potentials and abilities, the modest person would be, on the ignorance account, the one who plugs his ears with his

fingers and runs the other way. Surely none of these consequences of Driver's account is consistent with any common conception of virtue and it certainly seems that we would do better to reject her account than to accept these odd results.

The contention that virtues require knowledge has been well-entrenched into virtue ethics for a good reason: it makes sense. By allowing a class of virtues that by definition require ignorance, virtue ethics is severely compromised. We should encourage both virtue and acquisition of knowledge, including the self-knowledge that comes with understanding oneself as well as one's talents and accomplishments. Acceptance of Driver's proposal entails endorsing virtue while, in some cases, discouraging knowledge. This cannot be right. By understanding ourselves, we are more likely to lead fulfilling lives and make the most of our abilities, and we are less likely to find ourselves in dangerous, compromising situations. If someone were to underestimate himself, he would not be able to make full use of his talents since he would not realize the full extent of their applicability and, rather than cultivating them and becoming a richer person, these talents would atrophy and wither away.<sup>11</sup>

Driver's problems continue when she tries to understand how modesty, on her account, can be understood to be a virtue. In other words, if modesty does require ignorance, why should we think that it is a good thing? She considers, but rejects, the suggestion that we hold intrinsically valuable the psychological state of reluctance to evaluate one's accomplishments. She also rejects the notion that we value the instrumental worth of modesty to the extent that modesty minimizes jealousy and envy. Her proposal is that modesty should be valued as a combination of these two failings: "reluctance to take in one's own accomplishments fully, to avoid adding up one's worth, which leads to the ignorance of self-worth, could be valued because recognition of this trait in others leads to an alleviation of the more destructive competitive emotions like jealousy and envy. It oils the wheels, so to speak."<sup>12</sup> This justification gives a central role to ignorance, but not in a way that uniquely pertains to modesty. Other traits, such as ambivalence or complacency, bring with them a reluctance to fully compute one's worth, which would then counter the emotions of jealousy and envy, but neither is a virtue.<sup>13</sup>

Driver's account of modesty therefore fails to answer to the question as to why modesty should be understood as a virtue because the account picks out, in addition to modesty, other propensities that could be indicative of underestimation but are certainly not virtues. Furthermore, Driver's account rests upon the highly dubious premise that there exists a class of virtues that require ignorance and, in this, flies in the face of a well-entrenched facet of virtue theory. Even were we willing to abandon this expectation—which, again, I do not think that we should—she would still be hard pressed to explain why modesty, according to her conception, should be understood as a virtue and, at the same time, be able to exclude other traits that are fairly obviously not.

### **3. THE NON-OVERESTIMATION/ACCURACY ACCOUNT**

Another class of accounts about modesty holds that the possession of modesty is a function of what the modest person believes about himself. If someone believes

himself to be the greatest thing since sliced bread, we most likely think that he is not a modest person, and this intuition fuels the thought that modesty is related to belief. As we saw, Driver held that modesty consists in underestimation, which involves one species of false belief. Furthermore, I take it to be obvious that overestimation of one's merits could not be indicative of modesty; this idea certainly fails to capture anything that we mean when we talk about modesty. So, if we are going to have a belief-based account of modesty, and neither overestimation nor underestimation works, perhaps modesty consists in *correct assessment* of oneself. This is the path taken by Flanagan's account of modesty and by Norvin Richards's related account of humility.<sup>14</sup> In this section, I will consider Flanagan's account specifically but, later in the paper, I will make more general remarks about why any account that says that modesty can be explained entirely in terms of the beliefs that the modest person has about himself will ultimately fail.

Though Flanagan avoids the criticisms that assail Driver, he runs into an entirely different species of problems. Consider a chef who accurately reports that he is not a very good chef. Granted, this accurate report evidences a more desirable character trait than being disposed to inflate his abilities, but it is more indicative of displaying self-knowledge than of evidencing a virtue. The chef merely reports what his ability is and this does not seem sufficient to earn him the virtue of modesty. Something else has to be required. For starters, he does not have much talent at all, so he does not have anything to be modest about. He is quite simply a bad chef and this lack of talent prevents his cooking ability from being something about which he could be modest.

But let us suppose that we take someone who actually does have a talent and ask whether his accurate assessment of that talent could possibly constitute modesty. If so, then maybe Flanagan's account would not be that difficult to modify. Assume that, as Flanagan requires, this person is fully aware of his abilities and has complete understanding as to how they compare with those of others. If the accuracy account gave the right analysis of modesty, then it would follow that this person is modest. Let us imagine that the great scientist that I discussed earlier accurately assesses himself to be the best scientist of the century. His evaluation of his scientific ability falls neither above nor below the actual ability, but rather gets it exactly right. On the accuracy account, this would make him modest. But, though he both has some ability and correctly evaluates the ability, it simply does not follow that he is modest. As an empirical fact, many of the people that we are most inclined to call immodest are precisely those that have abilities and are aware of those abilities, as well as being more than likely to make everyone around them aware of their abilities. Certainly we do not want an account of modesty that designates these people modest.

From the start, Flanagan runs into two significant problems. First, his accuracy account holds that modesty is constituted by self-knowledge, yet these two seem like different kinds of things. One is a virtue, which is a kind of disposition to act in a certain way, whereas the other is a specific set of beliefs. Virtues also involve being motivated in some way and having certain emotional responses to situations, and it is doubtful that these could be successfully argued to result from

self-knowledge. Second, as we saw in the gifted scientist case, self-knowledge is not sufficient for modesty (though it might be necessary).

One way that Flanagan could go is to build in the assumption, reminiscent of Christian theology—and most likely an element of humility—that an accurate understanding of one's accomplishments and abilities will reveal that they are not that significant. With this assumption, his account seems slightly more plausible. A gifted runner might, for example, after a great race, say it was only a race and therefore not that significant. He might think that his accomplishment really is not worthy of the accolades to which some might think him entitled. This sort of behavior, assuming that he was speaking sincerely, could certainly be interpreted as modesty. But the consequences of accepting this assumption are so undesirable that we should look for a better solution. It does not seem right to say that an accurate understanding of one's merits will necessitate the belief that they are not that significant; a correct understanding might convince one of their significance.

The trouble in Flanagan's argument lies in his idea that only modest people can put their achievements into proper perspective. Immodest people could quite readily believe that they can continue to refine and improve their talents without ever ceasing to be immodest. Professional athletes often proclaim that they are the best in the world yet believe that they will continue to get better. They may accurately assess their elite status, yet it does not follow that their merits are not that significant, which is what Flanagan needs to secure. Some accomplishments really *are* that significant. That is part of what it means to be a genuine accomplishment: there must be some significance involved. Flanagan is therefore committed to holding that there are no genuine accomplishments if he wants to hold onto the additional assumption that might be able to make his account tenable. And this is a commitment to which we do not want to be bound.

Even if we were tempted to grant this assumption, Flanagan's account still seems odd in that it defines modesty strictly in terms of self-knowledge. Though modesty might require self-knowledge, I find it implausible that it is entirely constituted by it. If a person were to accurately report that he was tall or that he had brown eyes, it does not seem to me that he could possibly be displaying modesty; why should the result be any different when his assessment pertains to an ability rather than a physical characteristic? At a minimum, some further argument would need to be given to specifically delineate the types of self-knowledge that are pertinent to modesty, and I do not think this looks to be a promising solution. Absent these theoretical problems, Flanagan still has to contend with the objection that, given some genuine accomplishment, self-knowledge does not necessitate modesty, as in the case of the immodest gifted scientist.

Thus I think that neither Driver's underestimation account nor Flanagan's accuracy account works. The rejection of these two proposals—coupled with the obvious claim that overestimation cannot entail modesty—leads to the more general position that one's beliefs about oneself are not entirely constitutive of modesty. This consequence is interesting, considering that many pre-theoretic definitions of modesty have something to say about what the modest person believes about

himself. I will turn now to Schueler's proposal, and then my own, both of which make use of this result and look beyond belief-based models.

#### 4. SCHUELER'S ACCOUNT

The initial plausibility of both the underestimation and accuracy accounts comes from the way in which they provide some fit with our intuitions about how to characterize modesty. When people do underestimate their merits, we have a tendency to call them modest; this is true despite the fact that underestimation evidences lack of self-knowledge, not modesty. Similarly with the accuracy account, we might take someone to be modest who plays down their accomplishments by citing their insignificance. This, as has been argued, is indicative not of modesty but of self-knowledge and is problematic given the existence of genuine accomplishments. Since we have yet to reach an acceptable account of modesty, one proposal would be to look more closely at the intuitions that have given rise to flawed accounts. What seems to have happened is that, in formulating a more general account based on our intuitions, we have ended up with accounts that are either of the wrong form, are not restrictive enough, and/or fail to capture the goodness of modesty. If we instead look at some of the intuitions themselves, rather than the more abstract principles that they arguably give rise to, we might come closer to understanding the nature of modesty.

Schueler tries to make the project simpler by adopting this approach. Rather than ask for an intuitive conception of what modesty is, he tries to figure out something that is, in some ways, more basic: how the immodest person acts. Though we might not be able to come up with some abstract principle, we can hopefully ostensibly indicate immodest behavior when we see it, or at least some of its more obvious manifestations. Perhaps this extra step will bring us closer to finding an adequate account of modesty by understanding what modesty is not.

Schueler's idea that we can learn something about modesty from the behavior of the immodest indicates two interesting results. First, he is looking for some feature of immodest behavior and will say that modesty consists in *not* demonstrating this feature. Thus his account will define modesty negatively (i.e., in terms of immodesty rather than the other way around).<sup>15</sup> Second, Schueler implicitly assumes from the idea that we can learn about modesty from observing immodest behavior that there is no third option. Behavior or, by extension, a person, is either modest or immodest. If it were possible for someone (or some action) to be neither modest nor immodest, nothing could be learned about modesty by excluding immodesty. I certainly think that this is a warranted assumption. There are pretty clear instances where classification of an act as modest or immodest is not applicable, but this is not to say that the act is neither modest nor immodest, but just to say that the question is inappropriate (e.g., one cannot classify the act of summing two and two as either modest or immodest).

But if we were asked whether someone was modest or immodest, it would not make sense to say neither. There may, of course, be degrees of modesty, which is to say that a person could be very modest, slightly immodest, and so on. Or with respect to different talents and accomplishments, a person might not evidence

the same amount of modesty; he could be modest about his noteworthy guitar playing ability but immodest about his equally impressive athletic ability. (His overall status is presumably a function of his modesty or immodesty towards his constitutive talents and accomplishments.) This admission of degree however, does not change the fact that there are still only two concepts involved: modesty and immodesty.

Turning back to the substance of Schueler's account, he asks you to imagine that you have just won a Nobel Prize and asks you to think how you would go about convincing people that you were modest about your accomplishment. If you wanted to convince people that you were modest, "you wouldn't, for instance, brag about it. You would not call up the local newspapers and ask if they wanted to interview you. You would not put the words 'Nobel Laureate' after your name on your stationery or on your office door."<sup>16</sup>

Schueler's proposed question is problematic in that it asks how to *convince people* that one is modest. Clearly I can convince people that I am modest without actually being modest; this is what is known as "false modesty." In other words, I can give all outward pretenses of being modest while being quite immodest.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, convincing other people is not the relevant issue. Spies, for example, can convince government officials that they are trustworthy, yet this does not mean that they are.<sup>18</sup> The question that I think he should ask is, if someone *actually were* modest, how would he act? As we shall see, his failure to distinguish between these two questions ends up being a liability to his account.

Schueler maintains that there are two conditions for modesty.<sup>19</sup> The first is that the modest person must have, and be aware of having, some genuine accomplishment. Someone who finishes last in a footrace every time and concludes that he is not a good runner is not displaying modesty but merely acknowledging his lack of talent; this was one of the criticisms against Flanagan's account. Awareness is also essential since someone who regularly accomplishes some spectacular athletic feat—such as running a four-minute mile—without appreciating the significance of the accomplishment, has not achieved the proper perspective that can facilitate modesty and tempt immodesty. I think that Schueler is exactly right on both of these points.

Schueler's second condition, though, is that the modest person must not care whether people evaluate him highly based on his accomplishments. Schueler is prompted to add this second condition because he asked such a problematic question at the beginning of his account—*viz.*, "how does the modest person *convince others* that he is modest?" The condition requires a certain attitude that the modest person have towards others, but it seems to me that this attitude can also be held by some immodest people. If this is true, then Schueler's two conditions are not sufficient for modesty.

In searching for a counterexample to Schueler's account (i.e., someone who satisfies both conditions yet is not modest), consider someone who is immodest but presents a modest countenance out of self-interested motivations. An immodest person can have a hard time making friends, working in groups, impressing superiors, and so on. In order to secure these social ends, he can mask his immodesty to

the external world.<sup>20</sup> Such a person is not seeking validation from others based on his accomplishments but rather seeks the benefits associated with the perception of a socially important character trait. Assuming that this falsely modest person satisfies Schueler's first condition, does he satisfy the second? In one sense, yes: he thinks that masking his immodesty is more important than trying to earn high evaluations from others. Therefore, all things considered, he does not desire high evaluations from others. If he actually did have this desire, we would expect it to somehow influence his practical deliberation but, since it could conceivably be trumped for all time and in all cases by the desire to be perceived as modest, it never does. If this is the case, then I do not think that the falsely modest person actually cares about whether or not he is evaluated highly based on his actions.

Schueler can rightfully point out that this person does have some desire to be evaluated based on his accomplishments, albeit one that is perpetually overridden. But this relegates that desire to an irrelevant status since it will never influence action, and therefore is not one that, in a fuller sense of desire, the falsely modest person actually has. I certainly recognize that this counterexample is contentious and, though I think that it weighs heavily against Schueler's theory, I appreciate that others may disagree.<sup>21</sup> I bring it up nevertheless because I think that the possibility of false modesty seriously threatens Schueler's account, and this is one instance wherein that pressure exerts itself.

To take a more straightforward counterexample, consider the arrogant man: he could have, and be aware of, some genuine accomplishment yet not care whether or not others are impressed with his accomplishments. Therefore, he satisfies both of Schueler's conditions. But yet he is not modest. The reason that Schueler's account wrongly characterizes the arrogant man as modest is that his second condition makes no reference to the *reasons* that the modest person has for not caring about being evaluated highly by others. Certain reasons are certainly incompatible with modesty. The arrogant man is indifferent towards the evaluations of others because he thinks that he is better than they are and therefore their evaluations are irrelevant. Though he does not care about being evaluated highly by others, he does not care for the wrong reasons, and he therefore cannot possess the virtue of modesty.

Schueler's conditions are insufficient since they are too broad: they end up wrongly categorizing some immodest people as modest. One suggestion is that his conditions could be necessary but not sufficient. This might have been what he intended; he said that modesty required "at least" this much.<sup>22</sup> Yet he concludes his account and does not make any attempt to fill out the remaining picture, nor does he acknowledge his cognizance of these objections. Perhaps he believes that his overall project, explaining why modesty is a virtue, can be completed without completely characterizing it. Though I am quite committed to giving him a charitable reading, his writing leaves no reason to ascribe either of these beliefs to him and I think that it is quite reasonable to interpret him as having thought that a complete account had been provided. Regardless, the aim of my project is to provide a complete account and it is clear that Schueler has not yet done so. I will now turn towards developing my own account.

## 5. MODESTY AS BEHAVIOR OR DISPOSITION

In presenting my own account of modesty, let us return to Driver and discuss a proposal that she categorically rejected, a proposal that I hope can lead to the correct understanding of modesty. Where I disagree with her is in her quick and cursory dismissal of the behavioral account and the related dispositional account, which I think point us toward the correct understanding of modesty. According to the behavioral account, modesty entails some sort of behavior, namely the careful avoidance of bragging.<sup>23</sup> The reason that Driver thinks it fails is that she believes we can make sense of the following claim “Ron does not brag, but Ron is not modest.” If modesty merely meant that one did not brag, this sentence would be a contradiction. But, she thinks, it is not a contradiction, and therefore modesty cannot mean that one does not brag.<sup>24</sup>

In the event that we do not find the sentence contradictory, she tells the following story to convince us. Imagine that Robinson Crusoe has been marooned on a deserted island. During his stay on this island, he builds a house, grows crops, tailors his own clothes, and so on. As a result, he develops a very high, though accurate, opinion of himself. He holds himself in very high regard as a consequence of his accomplishments and justifiably so since very few people would have excelled in the same manner given the same circumstances. Yet, since there are no other people around, he does not brag. However, this mere contingency, the absence of other people, should not automatically earn him the status of being modest. We can certainly imagine that his success and achievement get to his head and foster immodesty. Given this possibility, it does not necessarily follow that, simply because he does not brag, he is modest.

She considers the response that Crusoe, though not evidencing braggart behavior, may nevertheless be said to have a disposition to brag if an audience would merely present itself; this disposition alone would be enough to compromise his claim to modesty. Perhaps, if rescued, he would tell everyone of his feats, and tell them often and loudly. But, she claims, despite this objection, we can easily imagine a man who is immodest yet does not have the disposition to brag. This man might find it distasteful or might find such behavior contrary to other interests that he wishes to pursue. Such behavior might not be in his self-interest and, for this reason alone, he abstains. Driver therefore concludes that both not bragging and not being disposed to brag are insufficient to evidence modesty and therefore rejects not only the behavioral account, but also this dispositional account.

I disagree with Driver’s claim that Crusoe does not brag, and I disagree with her claim that we can imagine a man who is immodest and yet does not have the disposition to brag. Driver, in discussing the behavioral account, assumes that bragging, and therefore acting on the disposition to brag, requires an *external* audience. This is typically how we understand behavior. Behavior is the sum of our acts and is something that, given the presence of others, could be observed. But it is my contention that bragging is not something that works only in this way. In other words, I will argue that bragging is not the kind of thing that can only be

manifested externally (like other behaviors such as shooting baskets or building a sand castle), but can also be characteristic of an internal state. An immodest person does not have to brag, nor does he need to have a disposition to brag, to other people. He can brag, or have the disposition to brag, to himself.

Bragging is a two-place predicate: A brags to B. A and B might, but do not have to, represent different people (e.g., Mary brags to her sister). It might also be the case that, if A brags to B, B (or even A) could represent a class of people (e.g., Mary brags to her friends). But the important point is that A and B can represent the same person (or classes of people). It is perfectly intelligible to say that Robinson Crusoe brags to Robinson Crusoe or, more colloquially, Robinson Crusoe brags to himself. If this is right, then the sentence “Ron does not brag (nor is he disposed to brag), but Ron is not modest” is plausibly contradictory. If the position can be defended that the modest person does not, or is not disposed to, brag to himself, then the sentence will yield a contradiction. We could then say that one cannot at the same time hold both conjuncts: it must be the case that Ron neither brags nor is disposed to brag or else Ron is not modest. If Ron is modest, then he neither brags nor is disposed to brag.

This is, I think, is the right account of modesty, or at least a good first approximation. Something is still going to have to be said as to whether modesty entails a certain behavior or a disposition, but I shall defer this discussion until later. I will also return to the other features that properly characterize modesty as a virtue. For Ron to be modest, he must also have full self-knowledge. He would not be modest if he did not brag because he had the false belief that he had no accomplishments or talents to brag about—this is a consequence of the rejection of Driver’s underestimation account. In the next section, I will look at what it means to brag to oneself. Then, in section §7, I will discuss why modesty, understood as neither bragging nor being disposed to brag, is a virtue. For the account to be successful, something needs to be said about why modesty, understood in this way, is a good thing.

## 6. THE MIND’S EYE

First, we need a plausible account of what it means for the modest person to not brag to himself. Let us begin by looking at work that has been done on the moral emotion of shame and then try to bring some of those ideas into my account of modesty. In attempting to characterize shame, we can look at the classic example of a man who makes a vulgar gesture. The man, after making this gesture, realizes that he has been observed. This realization prompts him to evaluate his own actions through the perspective of the observer and, if he recognizes this perspective as legitimate and endorses it, he realizes that his act is vulgar and he will feel shame.<sup>25</sup>

As both Gabriele Taylor and Bernard Williams have argued—and herein lies the important parallel to modesty—the observer need not necessarily be external to the agent. Williams writes that “even if shame and its motivations always involve in some way or other an idea of the gaze of another, it is important that for many of its operations the imagined gaze of an imagined other will do.”<sup>26</sup> For

example, a philosopher may, upon reading a draft of an article that he has just written, realize that it is entirely incoherent drivel. This assessment can arouse feelings of shame since he is ashamed of his work and feels shame for having produced it. Though there exists no external observer, this example has all the relevant features of the more basic case. The philosopher subjugates himself, via his work, to the perspective of an evaluator and, by endorsing the critical assessment of the evaluator, engenders a shameful reaction within himself. Taylor makes this point quite nicely: "All that seems necessary is he shift his viewpoint from that of the creator of the work to that of the critical assessor, and he himself can fulfill both these functions."<sup>27</sup>

The cases of shame wherein the agent is viewed by an external viewer do not exhaustively represent all cases of shame since the external observer is not required. The example of the philosopher feeling shame upon evaluation of his own work is one example to support this claim. Returning to modesty, we can readily see where Driver went wrong in quickly dismissing the behavioral account: she took the cases of bragging to an external audience to exhaustively represent all cases of bragging. However, one can be said to brag when, in a certain way, one shifts one's viewpoint from agent to observer<sup>28</sup> and brags internally to oneself such that the role played by the external observer in our ordinary conception of bragging is played instead by the self.

One important disanalogy between the role of the observer in shame and in modesty is that, in the case of shame, the agent must share the values of the observer. Williams thinks that this other must be a "representative of some socially identified group,"<sup>29</sup> which is to say that the agent internalizes the values of the observer and endorses them. This socially identified group may be as abstract as "human" or more concrete such as "British" or "familial," but there must be some common ground between the agent and the observer in order to facilitate shame. Modesty works differently in that it is not the case that the agent must share any values with that of the observer. In shame, the agent realizes that he has transgressed some more of the social group with which he identifies, and this is what elicits the shameful response. But in modesty, all that matters is that the agent brags to the observer and, in this, no normative evaluation need be made. Values are therefore absent in this case whereas they were not in the case of shame.

Another important point is that it is not true that an individual merely shifting her viewpoint from that of agent to that of an observer is indicative of immodesty. It would be an unwelcome result, and clearly weigh heavily against my proposal, if any sort of introspection resulted in immodesty. This is definitely not what I am advocating. Merely evaluating one's accomplishments or abilities, which is a specific way of observing them, is not a vice. We need the account to allow us to make evaluations such as dissatisfaction with a job done poorly or satisfaction with a task well done without being labeled immodest. Similarly with abilities, there should be no moral approbation against wishing to be a better father or husband, or recognizing that one has adequately lived up to these roles. Such recognition and introspection might well be a central element towards eliciting proper behavior or facilitating repetition of proper behavior once performed.

What I think is sufficient for immodesty then, is not merely a shift in viewpoint, but a shift in viewpoint such that the immodest person brags to the created observer. Bragging entails a certain mental state: that extolling oneself or thinking vaingloriously about one's abilities or accomplishments. It is this state that a modest person avoids. I think, but shall not argue at length, that entering this state is necessary for immodesty. One can demonstrate immodesty, of course, not only by bragging to oneself, but also to others. I seriously doubt, however, that there are any immodest people who brag only to others and not to themselves. Even considering singular immodest acts, it seems to me that, though there might be an external observer, the mind's eye is always present. In the case of bragging, one is always bragging to oneself, yet not always to others. A person can obviously tell friends that she has just won the Nobel Prize without bragging; this is a descriptive fact that can be readily communicated. But, while bragging, one is seeking a certain validation or recognition that by its very nature brings with it observing oneself through the mind's eye by using oneself as the object of discourse. So, while bragging to others is certainly indicative of immodesty, it is reasonable to hold that considering this a sufficient condition is superfluous, since we can capture all of the same cases by saying that the modest person does not brag to himself. Furthermore, it is not accurate to say it is a necessary condition, since the external audience is not always required.

## 7. MODESTY AS A VIRTUE

Before discussing why modesty is a virtue, I would like to make some more general comments about virtue. One reason that I think that the other accounts go wrong is that they attempt to characterize modesty without understanding it *as a virtue* and, consequently, their accounts take on the wrong form. If we have some idea what general virtues are supposed to be, trying to characterize a particular one becomes much easier, given that we at least know what the overall account should look like. Any errors that result will then be more likely in the details than in the entire substance of the account.

Though virtues are typically manifested through behavior, they should be understood as consisting in certain dispositions, not behaviors, and the reason for this is simple. Demonstrating a virtue, or behaving virtuously, requires being in a situation wherein that virtue can be displayed. If possession of virtue required virtuous behavior, then nobody could possess a particular virtue when the opportunity to display that virtue did not exist. For example, for someone to be courageous, he would *actually* have to be in the process of displaying his courage, perhaps through brave action in battle. Making virtues hang on behavior rather than disposition to behave in a certain way has the unwelcome result that, absent certain situations, virtues do not exist. I take it to be fairly obvious that generals are still courageous while they sleep and during times of peace. It is not plausible that the general be considered courageous when in battle and not courageous outside of battle. What matters is that he is disposed to act courageously were he to be inserted in a situation that demanded it.

So then we can ask in virtue of what does the courageous general possess the virtue of courage? And the answer is that he is courageous if, were he to be found in a battle (or any other situation demanding courage), he would act courageously for the right reasons and in the right way. It could be objected that at least some virtuous behavior might be necessary for possession of a virtue. If someone were to *never* act virtuously (but be disposed to do so in the right circumstances), does it still make sense to call that person virtuous? For example, consider a hermit who has no contact with any other people or living creatures. It might seem odd to call him generous, even if he used to give generously when he was still a member of society and would continue to do so were he to return (though I am not sure that we are necessarily committed to the oddity of this ascription). But if we agree that behavior is necessary, I think that we would be stuck with the result that sleeping generals are not courageous, which is just not plausible. It does not matter whether the requisite behavior lapses for eight hours or thirty years.

The objection can be partially disarmed by noting that dispositions will, under normal circumstances, lead to action. There are not many cases where possibilities to act virtuously do not exist: in the world we live in, one almost always has the opportunity to display any given virtue. So hermit cases, if there really are any, will be quite rare. We can certainly recognize the importance, if not necessity, of action by noticing that virtue (and disposition) must be cultivated through regular action. One learns to act virtuously through practice, and virtuous acts are made one's own through habituation. Thus the dispositions are acquired through behavior and by internalizing those behaviors and their justifications. It is impossible to become courageous without being in situations that demand courage, but this is not to say that those situations must persist forever to maintain one's courage.

Turning back to modesty, it therefore seems odd that Driver argues against the behavioral account rather than against the dispositional account. We can also note the form of the accounts taken by both Driver and Flanagan who both presented belief-based accounts. For them, modesty consisted entirely in what one believes about oneself. But, if virtues are dispositions, then their accounts are not even of the proper form. Though dispositions may crucially involve belief, there is more to a disposition than merely a set of beliefs. These beliefs must be coupled with certain kinds of motivation, certain affective responses, and so on. Thus neither their accounts nor the one that Driver rejects can properly characterize modesty since the accounts do not have all the features that a virtue should have.

Earlier in this paper, I said that modesty consisted in either the actual avoidance of bragging or in possession of the disposition not to brag, but I did commit to one or the other. Given the account that I have developed, I do not think that there is a tremendous difference between either of these two options since bragging, as I understand it, is not something that must be manifested as external behavior. Actual avoidance of bragging is entailed by the disposition not to brag just as acting courageously (when possible) is entailed by the disposition to act courageously. Since opportunities to brag are always present, I think that the two collapse into each other for the particular virtue of modesty. However, in

accordance with the conception of virtue that I am advocating, I will assert that modesty consists in being disposed to avoid bragging.

There are a couple further quick points that I would like to make about why modesty is correctly understood as a virtue. Virtues, according to Philippa Foot, are “corrective, each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good.”<sup>30</sup> This is a valuable point about virtue. Courage, for example, consists in resisting the temptation to flee or in bolstering one’s motivations to stand firm. (Or, less commonly, courage requires combating rashness, and paying reverence to some appropriate amount of fear.) Modesty, in opposing only immodesty, rather than opposing two extremes like fleeing and being rash, more closely resembles justice than courage. But the same point can be made. Injustice is certainly a temptation, especially when one’s own interests will be served. Immodesty is also a temptation that must be resisted and one that those lacking virtue are often too quick to indulge. What makes immodesty tempting is that the immodest person can earn himself accolades through making his talents and accomplishments known and by coloring these with embellishments and stature that are frequently undeserved. These accolades are things that most of us would like to have, as well as the increased social standing that may accompany them. Therefore, immodesty tempts us and modesty involves resisting the temptation.

Modesty, like all other virtues, also has certain emotional and motivational components. Virtues must involve more than simply dispositions to act and this is because the disposition might manifest itself for the wrong reasons. For example, I might have the disposition to act courageously so that I can earn a reputation for being courageous and the motivation here might derive from the rewards that reputation affords rather than the attractiveness of virtue. In light of this concern, something else needs to be said about what motivates the modest person’s cultivation and retention of this disposition not to brag, so that it does not turn out to be the case that possession of modesty admits of the wrong motivations.

There are two things that we can say here. The first is that the right disposition is incompatible with acting for the wrong reasons. What I have in mind here is that if someone wanted to act virtuously just for social ends, then he would not act virtuously when nobody was around. Thus, he would not actually have the proper disposition. Instead of actually having the disposition to act virtuously which is necessary for possession of virtue, he might instead have the disposition to act virtuously when nobody is around, which is not the disposition that virtue requires. Though this might address the problem, I think that a better answer can be given. The reason that I would not endorse this response is that it could be suggested that the best way to earn the best reputation would be to *actually* have the disposition to act virtuously. In the consequentialist literature, a distinction is frequently made between the standard and the decision procedure, which might mean that the best way to actually get something that you want (e.g., reputation) is to aim for something else (e.g., virtue).<sup>31</sup> So it is possible that someone could end up with the right disposition, though his reasons for having it would be wrong, and I think that this makes a difference.

What looks to be more promising is to build in more requirements for virtue. Rosalind Hursthouse has suggested that acting virtuously requires the following: (1) performance of a certain virtuous action; (2) knowledge of what the agent is doing; (3) action for the right reason; and (4) possession of the appropriate attitudes and feelings by the agent during action.<sup>32</sup> My discussion in this paper has been concerned with possession of a virtue rather than a virtuous action, but her list can be readily adapted to my purposes. We have already discussed how modesty incorporates the first two of Hursthouse's criteria, but I think that it is important to look at the second two as well and to see how my account for modesty can incorporate these two important features.

Hursthouse's third condition solves the problem that I posed earlier wherein the disposition could arguably exist but for the wrong reasons (e.g., reputation). If we stipulate that the wrong reasons nullify the claim to virtue, the problem goes away. What are the right reasons? The reason that a virtuous disposition should be cultivated is *because* it is a virtuous disposition, not because of any associated instrumental benefits. Recognition of the disposition as virtuous necessarily motivates one to have it.<sup>33</sup> If one is motivated by any reason other than the draw to virtue, he is motivated by the wrong reason. Thus, the reason that the modest person is modest is because modesty is a virtue, and not because of any other reason.

The fourth condition captures the idea that the virtuous person must act virtuously without strain or reluctance. If someone begrudgingly makes a charitable contribution, for example, he is not fully in hold of virtue, else the begrudging never would have come into play. The virtuous person should act virtuously quite easily and gladly.<sup>34</sup> The modest person, in his modesty, should not be faced with some internal struggle that he eventually conquers. Simply not bragging is not good enough; this result must flow naturally from his virtue without encountering deliberative conflict along the way. When occasion to brag presents itself, which it continually does, the modest person does not wrestle with an urge to brag but merely abstains readily. I think that it is appropriate to extend Hursthouse's point about appropriate feelings and emotions beyond the emotion that the modest person feels when acting modestly, but also to characterize the emotion of the modest person when he observes immodesty: the modest person should view immodesty as the virtuous views the vicious, namely with some sort of disapprobation.

If modesty is taken to be the kind of disposition that I have described, can this explain why modesty is good? In answering this question, it is interesting to look at Schueler's answer. He thinks that the key to understanding modesty as a virtue must be found somewhere other than in the interpersonal value that it has (i.e., the extent to which it precludes the formation of envy and jealousy). Schueler is concerned that his account might suggest this answer and this concern is reason to believe that he has gotten something wrong along the way. On my proposal, unlike Schueler's, interpersonal interaction is not necessarily required for modesty, thus we are not tempted to suspect that interpersonal value would be the reason that modesty is virtuous. I think that modesty is not strictly a social virtue, but would be a virtue even for Robinson Crusoe stranded on his island.

Each of us individually—i.e., even absent interpersonal relations—would be better off were we to be modest, and whatever explanation we adopt for the goodness of modesty should accommodate this.

I take it to be one of the interesting and objectionable results of my account of modesty that the goodness of modesty is *not* found in the way that modesty enhances social relations, but rather in that it makes the possessor's life better (i.e., I conceive as modesty as a personal virtue rather than a social virtue). There are two different comments that I can make about this consequence. First, on the Aristotelian conception of virtue, one feature of the virtues is that they benefit their possessor. As someone who endorses this paradigm, it should not be surprising that my answer squares with it. There are, of course, other lines of thought in virtue ethics, but those are not the ones with which I am sympathetic. Though this might partially explain my result, it does not justify it in the sense that the non-Aristotelian shall not be swayed. Though there might be a fundamental difference on this issue, I can offer the following argument to support my position. If the goodness of modesty was to be found completely in the social effects that it produced, then false modesty would be just as good as modesty since it would produce the exact same effects. False modesty is clearly not good as modesty. Rather, it is a form of deception and of insincerity, neither of which is a good thing. Therefore the goodness of modesty must be found not entirely in terms of social effects but rather at least partially in the way in which modesty benefits the possessor independent of any external consequences. So I am not denying that modesty does have social benefits, but it must have personal benefits as well in order to be differentiated from false modesty.

After an initial false step, I think that Schueler gets the right answer to why modesty is good. The modest person recognizes her true place in things. If we correctly understand many of the causal elements leading up to our accomplishments and abilities, many, if not most, of these fall outside of our control. We are often in the right place at the right time, were brought up in certain way, were gifted with natural talents, and so on. This is not to say hard work does not play a role—it certainly does. But, when assessing one's accomplishments and merits, taking credit for them entails taking credit for many of the elements that produced them, and this is clearly not justifiable. Credit is not deserved for the elements that lie outside of one's control. The modest person does not want undeserved credit and this is certainly a desirable trait, a trait that earns modesty the status of a virtue.

Furthermore, immodesty has deleterious effects on its possessors. The immodest person must constantly waste time trying to cast himself in a more favorable light (even to himself). He must seek opportunities to facilitate this and be on the watch for them to occur. He squanders the deep, personal relationships with others that he could develop were he not too busy boasting and, in this, makes himself worse off. One sort of immodest person, the falsely modest, lives his life trying to deceive others, and commitment to this project takes a tremendous devotion. He must ensure that others never find out his true colors, and this task is hardly constitutive of human flourishing.

## Endnotes

1. Jean de la Fontaine, *Fables*, 2 vols. (Paris: Lettres Françaises, 1985), I.2. La Fontaine, a seventeenth-century French writer, produced an incredibly prolific corpus of work including over 200 fables with moral teachings.

"Master crow, perched on a tree,/ Held cheese in his beak./ Master fox, enticed by the smell,/ Spoke to him in such a way:/ "And hello Mister Crow./How pretty you are! How beautiful you seem to me!/ Without lying, if your song/ Resembles your plumage,/ You are the phoenix of the guests of these woods"/ At these words the crow was beside himself with joy;/ And to show his beautiful voice,/ He opens his broad beak and lets fall his catch./ The fox grabs it and says: "My good sir,/ Learn that all flattery/ Lives at the expense of whomever listens to it:/ This lesson is well worth your cheese without doubt."/ The ashamed and confused crow/ Swore, a bit late, that he would not be taken in again" (my translation).

2. Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 373–85.

3. Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 420–8.

A similar account has been presented by Norvin Richards to characterize the related notion of humility in "Is Humility a Virtue?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25.3 (1988): 253–9. Humility differs from modesty in that the former is a Christian virtue that would not have been endorsed by the Ancients, whereas modesty is one that I take to be more time-honored and less culturally emergent. Nevertheless, it is interesting to ask what the relation is between modesty and humility. I think they are clearly similar, but, different in an important way. Humility entails having a low opinion of oneself whereas modesty entails having a moderate opinion of oneself. ('Modest' comes from the Latin '*modestus*' which can be translated as 'moderate.' 'Humility' is derived from Old French '*humilité*' which in turn came from Latin '*humilis*' which translates as 'low.')

Thus, it seems to me that the two could come apart if someone had an excessively low opinion of oneself; in this case, he could be humble but not modest. G. F. Schueler never makes it explicit that he differentiates between the two concepts, but argues that Richards's account of humility will not work for modesty. Though his argument is certainly a good one, we can certainly undermine the need for it by identifying the two concepts as distinct.

4. G. F. Schueler, "Why Modesty Is a Virtue," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 467–85.

5. Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," 374.

6. Though Driver does not make this clear, it might be her contention that to be modest, one must underestimate all one's abilities and accomplishments. Thus, if I were modest about my cooking ability yet immodest about everything else, I would not be a modest person. If we take the sum of one's abilities and accomplishments to exhaustively comprise self-worth, her account is not in need of my proposed amendment. At any rate, we at least talk about modesty pertaining to things other than self-worth, and I think that an account of modesty should recognize this.

7. A further characteristic that we might want the underestimation account to include, and one that is not mentioned by Driver, is that it should be the case that the modest person underestimates himself relative to some appropriate barometer of merit. For example, if the speaker has never heard a truly great talk and then merely falsely speculates that his was not great compared with those he wrongly imagines trump his, this differs in a relevant feature from his having actually borne witness to great talks and wrongly assessing his to fall short of that caliber. According to the underestimation account, modesty would then be more evident in the latter rather than the former circumstances given that the subject had appropriate comparison points (though he erroneously evaluates his own performance).

8. Schueler, "Why Modesty Is a Virtue," 470.

9. What Driver might want to argue in response is that the underestimation needs to derive from some appropriate reason, which stupidity and self-deception would not satisfy. Perhaps the suggestion would be that underestimation must result from an unwillingness to accept evidence of one's merits; without this evidence one's self-evaluations would always be too low and underestimation would result. Driver certainly needs to say more here to preclude stupidity and self-deception from generating the necessary underestimation. If she can respond to this objection, however, she will have done nothing to escape the criticisms against virtue as ignorance that are presented next.

10. Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," 373.

11. One possible response from Driver that I do not find plausible is that she could stick by her account and maintain that those who have some talent or achievement and accurately assess its merit are, by stipulation, immodest. This would certainly preserve her account but, in doing so, loses too much. Many of us have the intuition that this would be false (i.e., there are modest people who are aware of their merits) and, from a theoretical standpoint, it looks like an arbitrary stipulation with no good grounding. Driver might also try to say that the immodest person underestimates himself, but not so much that his productivity or life is compromised. This I also think is a fruitless path since *any* amount of underestimation detracts from a life and, furthermore, she would be hard pressed to defend just how much underestimation was appropriate, how it was to be measured, and so on.

12. Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," 383–4.

13. Another potential problem with Driver's response here is that, if the goodness of modesty comes from "recognition of this trait in others," then her account must hang at least partially on behavior, since behavior is the only thing externally manifested for others to see. Driver earlier argued that underestimation was both necessary and sufficient for modesty, though she seems to be saying here that behavior is also necessary, which is at odds with her earlier position. She also explicitly denies that modesty has a behavioral component (375). In §7, I will discuss the relationship between behavior and modesty in more detail.

14. Flanagan calls his account the non-overestimation account, which I think is misleading since one can, of course, succeed in non-overestimation by accurate assessment *or* by underestimation. Given the problems with Driver's account, it would be more prudent for him to call his theory the accuracy account, which would be a subspecies of the non-overestimation account. See also Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" reference in note 3.

15. In advocating the same approach, John Stuart Mill suggested that "justice, like many other moral attributes, is best defined by its opposite." John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 42. Defining concepts in terms of their negations does not create any logical problems, but it also does not respect the etymologies of words (i.e., 'immodest' derives from 'modest' rather than vice versa).

16. Schueler, "Why Modesty Is a Virtue," 478.

17. Given the possibility of false modesty, behavior does not have a necessary connection with modesty; this is an important point to which I will return when discussing why modesty is a virtue. As a prelude, I will argue that the virtue of modesty cannot reside in any derivatives of perceived modest behavior (e.g., social cohesion) because these benefits are as compatible with false modesty as they are with genuine modesty.

18. One might be tempted to argue that we cannot convince someone of something that is false; rather we can only lead them to believe it or something similar. I do not find this plausible. To me, to convince merely means to sway by argument, and arguments can certainly be invalid or have false premises. If Schueler wants to object to my criticism, he would have to maintain that an immodest person cannot convince someone that he is

modest, in which case his account has not sufficiently characterized the internal state of the modest person, but merely alluded to how the results of that internal state would bear on others. So his account is at best incomplete, and at worst wrong. At any rate, the account of modesty needs to say something about the agent over and above the beliefs that he can trigger in others, since this fails to distinguish true modesty from false modesty.

19. Schueler, "Why Modesty Is a Virtue," 479.

20. It might be objected that, given sufficient time, "the mask will fall." This is no doubt true, but we can certainly imagine life ending before the mask does fall. It would, however, be improper to characterize him as modest, despite the fact that he was not found out.

21. To anticipate a criticism against my remarks here, imagine the claim that someone has a desire to cheat on his wife, despite the fact that he never acts on it. I do not deny that the desire exists in this case, even though it never leads to action. In this case, there are certain contingencies that trump the desire such as a rational fear of getting caught, a disposition to feel guilt, etc. If this husband were to find himself in a situation such that he was guaranteed that his transgression would go unnoticed and/or he were to become psychologically constituted such that he were impervious to guilt, then I assume that he would go ahead and cheat. (If he still did not, absent the removal of all reasons against, then I would certainly say that he did not really want to.) But, in the case of the falsely modest person, seeking positive evaluation from others is necessarily incompatible with being perceived as immodest. There is no state of affairs wherein one of the two desires (to be perceived as immodest and to have the evaluation of others) ceases to oppose the other. In the cheating case, however, it was possible for one of the conflicting desires to cease to oppose the other (if he was assured of not getting caught then the desire not to get caught no longer opposes the desire to cheat). Therefore, I do not think that it is an untenable position to hold that a falsely modest person does not really desire the evaluation of others if he always opts for being perceived as modest, though the husband really does desire to cheat even if he never does. The husband can at least hold out for conditions that might attain, whereas the falsely modest person cannot.

22. Schueler, "Why Modesty Is a Virtue," 479.

23. Again, in order to escape the possibility of false modesty, more needs to be said here than what Driver provides. The behavior must be motivated by the right reasons, performed knowingly, accompanied by the right emotions, etc. These features are unnecessary for the discussion that I undertake in this section, but I will return to them in §7.

24. Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," 375.

25. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Pocket Books, 1956), III.1.4.

26. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993), 82.

27. Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 58.

28. Note that, though I have preserved the viewpoint shift provided in the account of shame, I have modified the role that the viewpoint is shifted to. When one is able to feel shame without an external observer, one has to occupy the perspective of a critical assessor (to use Taylor's apt term). Bragging, however, does not require that an assessment has been made; all that is needed is an audience. I think that the notion of an observer more accurately captures this requirement than that of a critical assessor, which is more than we need. A critical assessor is merely one type of observer. The key insight that I want to extract from the account of shame is that of the audience and the shifting viewpoint, not that of a critical assessor, which does not necessarily apply to the notion of modesty.

29. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 84.

30. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 8.

31. See, for example, Peter Railton's "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13.2 (Spring 1984).

32. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 124–5.

33. I take internalism about moral motivation to be fairly obviously correct. If someone were to claim that helping others was good but did not ever try to help others when given the chance (and without any overriding reason not to), in what way could he possibly be said to think that helping others was good? Similarly, if someone were to claim that murder was wrong yet committed murder whenever possible, we would assume that he was not sincere when he told us that murder was wrong (or that he is not rational).

34. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 125.

