

4-22-2009

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MODESTY AS A GLOBAL PERSEPCTIVE

by

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BA, Philosophy & Humanities, University of Northern Iowa 2007

A THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI – ST. LOUIS

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

PHILOSOPHY

April, 2009

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Abstract

In this paper I give an account of modesty that focuses on having an appropriate global perspective of your achievements. Unlike other philosophers, I take a disjunctive approach, arguing that there are at least four ways one can have an appropriate global perspective of her achievements. Additionally, I argue that if one is to be modest she must not brag about or dwell on her achievements and she must believe with sufficient reason that she has achievements. I argue that modesty defined as such is both extrinsically and intrinsically valuable. Its extrinsic value derives from the positive social consequences it elicits, while its intrinsic value is that the person who holds this virtue is a certain kind of person. Namely, she is the kind of person who understands the global significance of her achievements with respect to the available evidence.

Introduction

“For anything we prize, it seems we can conceive a context wide enough so that the thing appears insignificant” (Nozick 604).

In recent years much has been written about modesty.¹ Philosophers have attempted to develop an appropriate theory of modesty and some have argued that modesty, under

¹ Note that there are roughly two senses of modesty. There is a sexual sense, such as, “She is wearing modest clothes,” and there is also the more usual sense associated with humility. The focus of this paper will be on the latter sense.

their theory, is a virtue. Nevertheless, there is far from a consensus as to what is the appropriate theory of modesty. In this paper, I propose a new theory of modesty that focuses on having a *global perspective* of your achievements. According to the global perspective account of modesty, modesty is a virtue and has three necessary conditions.

A person *P* is modest if and only if:

- 1) She believes with sufficient reason that she has success in one focused area.
- 2) She has a global perspective of this success.
- 3) She does not dwell on or brag about this success and she cares enough that others do not brag about this success.

These three necessary conditions together provide a sufficient condition for modesty. I will refer to condition one as the *success* condition, condition two will be referred to as the *global perspective* condition, and condition three will be referred to as the *asymmetry* condition.

In section (I) I will explain the global perspective theory of modesty in detail. Following this, in section (II) I will assess other philosopher's theories of modesty and explain the advantages of my theory. Then in section (III) I will field potential objections to my theory.

I. The Global Perspective Theory Defined

1) Reasonable Belief in Success,² Condition 1:

Imagine a person—Kyle—was told by *God*, that he was the worst at everything in life and he believes this. So, if it were somehow possible to order people by measuring all the possible accomplishments and skills in their lives, Kyle would rank last. Is it possible for Kyle to be modest? It is my intuition that Kyle has nothing to be modest about.³ Thus, even if he avoids bragging, he still cannot be modest because modesty requires some kind of success or positive quality.⁴

I am not alone with this intuition insofar as G. F. Schueler (1997) and Julia Driver (1999) make similar points in their respective theories. Schueler makes this point in arguing against Owen Flanagan’s “non-overestimation” account of modesty. Flanagan maintains that the modest person does not overestimate her accomplishments. Thus, if she sees her accomplishments accurately, she is modest. In response to Flanagan, Schueler says:

...accuracy accounts will have to say that the person, if she has a low, accurate opinion of herself, will be modest. (This is the sort of case in which, e.g., someone always comes last in footraces and thus correctly thinks she doesn’t have much ability at such races.)
But this is simply not the sort of person we would ordinarily call

² Note that the term “reasonable belief” in success is used interchangeably with the term “believing with sufficient reason.”

³ However, Michael Ridge thinks otherwise. In section 3.3 I directly address Ridge on this issue.

⁴ The term positive quality refers to positive attributes of a person that would ordinarily not be called having a success or an achievement, such as being friendly. However, for the intents and purposes of this paper success will include positive qualities.

modest. She has nothing to be modest about (Schueler 1997, 471-472, emphasis added).

Schueler is making a point similar to mine—the person who does not have success cannot be modest. However, I disagree with Schueler because I hold that actual success is not necessary for modesty. This point will be explained further below.

Driver asserts in her “refined”⁵ account of modesty that success is a requirement for modesty. She says, “The modest person is someone who has accomplished something, and the accomplishment is such that it would normally generate envy or jealousy in those around her” (Driver 1999, 828). I disagree with Driver’s success condition for two reasons. First, actual success is not necessary for modesty. Second, success should not be measured by whether or not others are envious of you. On my account, to be modest, one need not have actual success so long as one believes with sufficient reason that she has success in a focused area.⁶

Here is an example that shows actual success is not necessary for modesty. Suppose, a doctor—Zooey—believes that she has made a scientific discovery which could potentially lead to the cure of cancer. The entire scientific community is in a general agreement that her scientific discovery is sound, but as it turns out centuries later, she was completely off the mark. Does Zooey’s scientific discovery satisfy the *success* condition, even though it was not an actual success? I maintain that it does, because Zooey believes with sufficient reason that her theory is true (e.g., the evidence at the time

⁵ By “refined” account, I am referring to Driver’s 1999 paper on modesty and not her 1989 paper.

⁶ In section 3.1 I explain why one cannot have just any belief in success for modesty and I demonstrate why one must have a reasonable belief in success for modesty.

of her experiments seems to support her theory, her colleagues agree with her scientific findings, etc.). Therefore, she has something that she can be modest about—her apparent scientific discovery. This example explains why actual success is not necessary for modesty.

Another example that shows actual success is not necessary for modesty is: suppose Jose took the GRE test and after he was done the screen displayed that he scored 800 in both categories of the test. However, Jose actually only scored 200 in each category of the test; hence, it was only through a computer glitch that the computer displayed 800's for his score. I maintain that Jose has sufficient reason for believing that he has success, because the screen displayed that he had perfect scores. Thus, even though Jose does not have actual success, he has something that he can be modest about.

Here is an example that demonstrates why enviousness of success is not a necessary condition for modesty. Suppose there is another doctor—Charlotte—who has a scientific discovery which competes with Zoey's. However, the scientific community does not envy Charlotte's discovery. But, as it turns out years later, Charlotte's theory was actually correct and Zoey's was wrong. Does Charlotte's scientific discovery satisfy the *success* condition for modesty, even though she is not envied for this discovery? I believe so, because Charlotte has a reasonable belief that she has achieved success (e.g. her research as she sees it seems to support what she is saying, she is a well qualified scientist, etc). Charlotte, therefore, has something she can be modest about, despite not being envied.

Note that on Driver's account of success it is unlikely that Charlotte could be modest. This is because having a scientific discovery that is vehemently shown false by the community is normally not something people are envious about. This demonstrates an advantage my success condition has over Driver's. On Driver's view, Vincent Van Gogh could not be modest about his paintings because during his lifetime he was not a well-received artist (rumor has it he only sold one painting in his life), and this is not something people are normally envious about. Yet, under my definition, Van Gogh still has the potential to be modest about his ability to paint, insofar as he could have sufficient reason to believe that his paintings are of good quality. These examples show that enviability is not necessary for modesty.

At this point one might ask, "Why is it possible for Van Gogh to have sufficient reason to believe he is successful, but not Kyle?" This is a reasonable question; Van Gogh was considered by his contemporaries to be a complete failure, and God told Kyle that he is a complete failure. However, the difference is that God explicitly told Kyle that he is a failure at everything in life. Kyle could try to ignore such an assertion, but coming from an omniscient authority—*God*—this is just not possible. Van Gogh, on the other hand, although not well received by his contemporaries, could still have a reasonable belief that he was a great artist to the extent that he had good reason to trust in his own abilities.

Lastly, it should be noted that someone only needs to have "success" in one "focused" area to be modest about the "success" in that "focused" area. By "focused"

area, I mean a specific talent or achievement.⁷ For example, one focused area of Einstein's success would be his relativity theory. Consequently, Einstein could be a failure in many other areas and still potentially be modest about his relativity theory. However, if someone is holistically modest,⁸ then he needs to have multiple successes. It would not make sense to consider someone holistically modest if she is only successful in one minor area, but a failure in every other area. Hence, the difference between holistic modesty and focused modesty is that under focused modesty, a particular success is the object of modesty, but under holistic modesty, a person's totality of success is the object of modesty. This will be explained in more detail at the end of section 1.4.

2) Global Perspective, Condition 2:

Of course, the success condition alone does not provide a sufficient condition for modesty. Another necessary condition for modesty is to understand your focused success or successes "globally." By this, I mean seeing the "big picture" of your accomplishments. The global perspective is roughly what Robert Nozick is talking about when he says, "For anything we prize, it seems we can conceive a context wide enough so that the thing appears insignificant" (Nozick 604).

Some philosophers, such as Owen Flanagan, have alluded to this point. Flanagan imagines a very modest man, who happens to be the world's fastest human. The man acknowledges that he is the world's fastest human, but he does not hold such an

⁷ G. F. Schueler believes that this is the "primary sense" of modesty; I am undecided on this matter (Schueler 1997, 474).

⁸ Schueler calls this "global modesty" but I will not use this term because I am using the term global to mean something else (474).

accomplishment as highly as others do. Flanagan explains, “He might think that being the world’s fastest human is not so important *sub specie aeternitatis*, or he might think that his being the world’s fastest human involves a significant amount of luck” (Flanagan 425). Accordingly, when the world’s fastest human looks at his accomplishment globally, he concludes either that in the perspective of eternity his accomplishment amounts to very little, or that the credit is not entirely his, since there is a good deal of luck that goes into being the world’s fastest human.

A.T. Nuyen makes a point that is quite similar to the latter part of the Flanagan quote. Nuyen says, “To be modest is to be equitable with respect to one’s accomplishments” (Nuyen 106). To be equitable for Nuyen is to look at the particular circumstances that surround one’s skills and achievements. Nuyen says that “the particular circumstances will have a deflationary effect on one’s accomplishments” because “an achievement is almost invariably not entirely due to one’s own effort” (106-107). An example of this is the world’s fastest human who acknowledges that there are factors that help contribute to his accomplishments that he himself cannot take credit for (e.g. luck). However, with respect to “global significance,” there is an important difference between Nuyen’s theory of modesty and Flanagan’s. For Nuyen, modesty is equity, while for Flanagan, modesty is non-overestimating your accomplishments. Thus, for Flanagan, taking into account the circumstances that surround your achievements might help you non-overestimate the value of your achievements, but it is not necessary for modesty, as it is for Nuyen.

Another philosopher who believes that modesty involves assessing your accomplishments globally is Jason Brennan. Brennan advocates what he calls the “two standards account of modesty,” which is a modified version of Adam Smith’s theory of modesty. The “two standards account” proposes that there are two standards to which we compare our merit and character: “1) The first standard is that of moral perfection, the ideally virtuous person, the *phronimos*. 2) The second standard is the commonplace, the degree to which such perfection is commonly achieved” (Brennan 118). According to Brennan, when the modest person examines herself under the first standard she sees herself as falling short of the ideal. This drives her to continuously improve her abilities. When she assesses herself under the second standard, she recognizes that she is wiser than the majority of people. But already seeing her failings, she does not gloat, but feels compassion for others and is very forgiving of their imperfections, and for Brennan, this is a modest person (119-121).

Another example of a global perspective is found in Aaron Ben-Ze’ev and Daniel Statman who maintain that modesty involves looking at human worth as an egalitarian.⁹ Ben-Ze’ev explains, “[A modest person] *evaluates* his or her fundamental human worth as similar to that of other people; in this sense the agent is a type of *egalitarian*” (Ben-Ze’ev 238). Thus, according to Ben-Ze’ev and Statman the modest person is able to separate her successes from her value as a human being. For example, Michael Jordan may be the greatest basketball player ever, but he realizes that being the greatest basketball player ever does not give him greater moral value than other human beings.

⁹ Note that Ben-Ze’ev and Statman reached roughly the same conclusion about modesty independent of each other. The differences between their theories need not be discussed in this paper.

Thus, according to Ben-Ze'ev and Statman, Michael Jordan is modest because he is separating his moral worth from his achievements.

Right now we have four distinct examples for assessing your accomplishments globally. The first is examining your successes through the eyes of eternity. The second is examining the circumstances that surround your successes, particularly, looking at the influences of luck and community. The third is assessing your successes in relation to the ideal. The fourth is separating your successes from your value as a human. From this arises the question, which one is necessary for modesty? As I see it, they are all excellent examples of what it means to look at the “big picture” of your accomplishments.

However, I do not believe that any one of them is needed for modesty more than any other. The appropriate global perspective is contingent upon the context of the situation.

Admittedly, I am being a bit vague by not specifying what the “appropriate” global perspective is in certain conditions. But this is essentially the point: what matters for modesty is seeing the “big picture” of your accomplishments, which is dependent on the context. *Too many philosophers make the mistake of identifying modesty with one global perspective.* For example, Brennan believes modesty is in part seeing your accomplishments in relation to the ideal. However, this is problematic because we can clearly conceive of modest people who do not relate their accomplishments to the ideal. For instance, the world’s fastest human appears to be modest when he says he does not deserve all the credit for being the fastest human because there is a great deal of luck that contributed to his success. Hence, despite not comparing himself to the ideal, the world’s fastest human can still be modest. Thus, it is a mistake to say that the global perspective

is defined as a single global perspective. My account avoids this mistake by taking a disjunctive approach. Thus, I hold that one needs an appropriate global perspective to be modest and that an appropriate global perspective can be manifested in many ways.

One might wonder how the context of the situation can affect what an appropriate global perspective is for a person to have. I will provide a couple of examples to illustrate this point. Imagine a person who despite not having much help from others was able to achieve great success. Looking at the circumstances of her achievements will not help this person be modest because other people did not contribute a great deal to this person's success. Therefore, looking at the circumstances of her achievements might not be an appropriate global perspective for this person to have. We can also imagine a person whose achievements are truly great *sub specie aeternitatis*. Perhaps, this person discovered the cure to cancer. Since this person's achievements are truly great *sub specie aeternitatis* looking at her achievements through the eyes of eternity would not be an appropriate global perspective for this person to hold.¹⁰ These examples are merely intended to illustrate how different contexts can affect what qualifies as an appropriate global perspective. These examples are in no way meant to demonstrate an exact formula for what are appropriate and inappropriate global perspectives for people to have. I, like Aristotle, hold that issues like this can not be addressed with the exactness of mathematics.

It is also important to note that for modesty it is far more important that one have the right perspective of her achievements than that she understands the facts of her

¹⁰ In section 3.2 I deal with an objection that is related to this issue.

achievements accurately. Thus, one must understand the facts of one's accomplishments only to the extent that this helps one have an appropriate global perspective and a reasonable belief in success. For example, if someone says, "I may be the third greatest runner but I am no hero. There are people who risk their lives to save others, while I just run fast." Now suppose that this person is not the third greatest runner, but they are the eighth greatest. This statement still appears to be modest, despite having the facts wrong. Consequently, the modest person does not necessarily have to have a completely accurate account of her successes; she merely has to have the right perspective of them.¹¹

3) *Asymmetry, Condition 3:*

The global perspective theory is incomplete to the extent that someone can meet the first two conditions and fail to be modest. Accordingly, someone can have reasonable belief in some success and understand the significance of her success "globally," and fail to have modesty. For example, Kevin is a successful writer, having published many best selling books. Kevin realizes that his parents helped shape him into the writer that he is today. Moreover, Kevin understands that his books are not especially significant when compared to Shakespeare. Despite knowing this, Kevin boasts to everyone he encounters that he has sold a plethora of books and has made a good deal of money from them. It

¹¹ Hans Maes makes somewhat of a similar point to mine while criticizing Owen Flanagan's and Norvin Richards' account of modesty. However, he mistakenly conflates the idea of understanding the facts of an achievement with understanding the significance of an achievement. For example, Maes argues that an example like this demonstrates that Flanagan's and Richards' account of modesty is false. However, Flanagan and Richards maintain that the modest person does not overestimate his self-worth; this is different than overstating the facts of your achievements (Maes 486). Hence, Maes mistakenly believes an example like this will demonstrate Flanagan's and Richards' account of modesty because he has conflated understanding the facts of an achievement with understanding the significance of an achievement.

appears Kevin is quite immodest, and consequently, an additional condition is needed for modesty.

One thing that is certain is that a modest person rarely brags. This “non-bragging” behavior is best described as an asymmetry between what one person can say and think about herself and what others can say and think about her.¹² This asymmetry is evident in the example of Kevin. It may be true that Kevin has sold many books and has a lot of money but Kevin cannot say nor think these things about himself, and still be modest.¹³ However, it would not be inappropriate for someone else to say or think these things about Kevin. This example demonstrates that the same utterance can be appropriate or inappropriate depending on who utters it. This example, moreover, shows that there is an asymmetry that exists between what one person can say or think about oneself and what others can say and think about her.

This claim—that such an asymmetry exists—meshes with our conventional societal practices. For instance, it may be appropriate for my mom to assert that I should get my sister-in-law a present, but it is inappropriate for my sister-in-law to make this assertion. Another example of this asymmetry in our societal practices is giving and receiving compliments. It may be appropriate for me to compliment my brother on his handsome appearance, but it is inappropriate for my brother to compliment himself. Similarly, it is inappropriate for him to suggest that I should compliment him. The

¹² Maes makes a similar point in Maes 2004.

¹³ Unless of course, someone asked Kevin a direct question in which it was relevant for him to mention that he had a lot of money and was well published.

behavior in these examples is inappropriate because we cannot demand things like presents or compliments, they must be freely given.¹⁴

Accordingly, if someone is to be modest he cannot brag or dwell on his accomplishments. This asymmetry condition of modesty meshes with Bernard Williams' assertion that "it is a notorious truth that a modest person does not act under the title of modesty" (Williams 10). This is because if someone says, "I am a very modest person," he is presumptuously laying claim to something which he cannot claim—a compliment.¹⁵

Now it is obvious why the asymmetry condition includes a clause that we cannot brag about our accomplishments. But it might be unclear why the asymmetry condition includes a clause that we cannot dwell on our accomplishments. The purpose of this "no dwelling" clause is best explained in an example. Imagine a person who constantly thought, but never spoke, "I am no Michael Jordan, but I am still an awesome basketball player." Such a statement appears to be immodest even if it is true, yet if the "no dwelling" clause was not added to the asymmetry condition such a person would be modest. This is because he satisfies all three conditions of modesty (if the "no dwelling" clause is not added to the asymmetry condition). For example, he satisfies the *success* condition by being good at basketball. Moreover, he satisfies the *global perspective* condition by comparing his basketball skills to one of the greatest basketball players of all time. Lastly, he satisfies the asymmetry condition by not talking about his basketball skills. However, if the *asymmetry* condition includes the "no dwelling" clause, such a

¹⁴ For a more detailed defense of this view see Maes 2004 and Heyd 1982.

¹⁵ Of course, this would not necessarily be an immodest statement if this were a direct response to a question that asked someone if he was a modest person.

person is immodest, because he is dwelling on things that he himself should not be dwelling on (i.e. his basketball skills)

I would like to qualify this *asymmetry* condition. It may be true that others can say and think certain things about us that we cannot say and think about ourselves, but a modest person should also care enough that others around him do not excessively brag about his accomplishments. For instance, suppose Susan is a great humanitarian. Susan is often surrounded by people who brag about her achievements as a humanitarian. If Susan is modest, she should care enough that the people around her do not brag about her accomplishments. Furthermore, Susan should care enough that people do not overstate her responsibility and role in her humanitarian work.¹⁶ Intuitively, it seems that if Susan was comfortable being bragged about or if she was comfortable taking more credit than she deserved, then she would not be modest even if she did not brag or dwell on these things herself. Therefore, the *asymmetry* condition should be extended to include a clause, which states that a modest person should care enough that others do not brag about her accomplishments.

4) *False Modesty:*

One advantage of the global perspective account of modesty is that it is able to separate sincere modesty from false modesty. Let me explain. Behaviors that seem modest, such as responding to a compliment with the classic, “It was nothing,” are modest on my account only if the person saying this has a global perspective of the corresponding

¹⁶ Michael Ridge makes a similar point to mine (Ridge 2000)

accomplishment. It follows then, that a person who responds to a compliment with, “It was nothing,” is falsely modest if he does not hold a global perspective that corresponds to the accomplishment that he thinks is nothing. This is because the person who says, “It was nothing” without holding a corresponding global perspective lacks sincerity, and thus is only feigning modesty. But the person who says, “It was nothing” while holding a corresponding global perspective is sincere, and thus is not feigning anything. Thus, my account of modesty is able to separate sincere modesty from the false modesty. By having this distinction modesty becomes more than the pessimistic words of Schopenhauer, who said, “What then is modesty but hypocritical humility, by means of which, in a world swelling with base envy, a man seeks pardon for excellences and merits from those who have none?” (Schopenhauer 303).

Here is an example to better illustrate this point. Imagine there is “big time” lawyer—Spencer—who is inundated with so much work that he rarely has time to dwell on his accomplishments. Whenever Spencer is complimented about his success as a lawyer, he responds, “It was nothing.” However, Spencer actually thinks rather highly of his achievements as a lawyer, he just lacks the time to dwell on them. Spencer, therefore, is only feigning modesty. My account of modesty can explain why. For instance, Spencer satisfies both the *success* and *asymmetry* condition insofar as he has reasonable belief in his success (e.g. being a “big time” lawyer) and he does not brag about or dwell on this success. Nonetheless, Spencer does not satisfy the *global perspective* condition, and thus, on my account Spencer cannot be modest. The *global perspective* condition, therefore, distinguishes a modest person who does not brag about or dwell on her accomplishments

from an immodest person who does not brag about or dwell on her accomplishments.

This demonstrates how my account of modesty is able to separate sincere modesty from false modesty.

I will now provide some examples to help elucidate the relationship among all three conditions. Suppose Tom is a very attractive man and is often told that he is quite good looking. Tom's attractiveness satisfies the *success* condition because he has sufficient reason for believing that he is attractive (e.g. he is often told he is good looking). Although Tom is aware of his good looks, he rarely reflects upon them or talks about them insofar as he understands that having good looks is not all that important. Accordingly, Tom does *not brag about or dwell on* his attractiveness because he has a *global perspective* of seeing the worth of attractiveness *sub specie aeternitatis*. Consequently, Tom satisfies all three necessary conditions for modesty; thus, Tom is modest about his good looks. However, if Tom did not brag about or dwell on his looks but did not have a global perspective, then Tom would not be modest. Tom represents someone who has a modest attitude towards a focused success. An example of someone who is holistically modest would be if Tom held this attitude towards the majority of his successes.

Put in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, the difference between focused and holistic modesty is:

Focused Modesty

A Person *P* is focusedly modest if and only if:

- 1) She reasonable believes she has a success.

- 2) She has a global perspective towards this particular success.
- 3) She does not dwell on or brag about this success and she cares enough that others do not brag about this success.

Holistic Modesty

A Person *P* is holistically modest if and only if:

- 1) She reasonable believes she has several successes.
- 2) She has a global perspective towards the majority of her successes.
- 3) She does not dwell on or brag about her successes and she cares enough that others do not brag about these successes.

Hence, the difference between holistic modesty and focused modesty is that under focused modesty a particular success is the object of modesty. However, under holistic modesty the person's totality of success is the object of modesty or as Schueler puts it, "[Holistic modesty] is focused modesty that takes as its object all or the great majority of one's accomplishments" (Schueler 1997, 474). Because of this, holistic modesty involves having more successes, and having a global perspective for the majority of these successes, while focused modesty only involves one particular success.

It is important to note that there are different degrees of modesty. All three conditions in my theory can account for this. For example, someone who is more modest will understand her achievements from more global perspectives than someone who is only slightly modest. Moreover, someone who is more modest will understand the global perspectives on a much deeper level than someone who is only slightly modest.

Additionally, someone who is more modest will brag less and think about her accomplishments less than someone who is only slightly modest. Lastly, one who reasonably believes his successes are great can be more modest than someone who reasonably believes her accomplishments are mediocre. This is because the former person has more to be modest about. For example, Michael Jordan has more to be modest about than the average YMCA “all-star.”

5) *Virtue:*

Here I will argue that modesty is both extrinsically and intrinsically valuable. My argument will take the form of me first introducing Julia Driver’s position on this matter; which is that modesty is only valuable for the positive social consequences it elicits. Following this, I will present George Schueler’s argument for why modesty is not only extrinsically valuable but also intrinsically valuable. I will then present my own view, which differs from both Driver’s and Schueler’s account.

Although Driver and I have different theories of modesty, I agree with her that modesty is a virtue because it helps “oil the wheels of social interaction” (Driver 1989, 384). Driver explains, “The modest person fails to elicit the sort of jealousy that a nonmodest person would engender. The modest person is, therefore, less troublesome” (384). I agree with Driver that modesty is extrinsically valuable, because in general, a modest person is much easier to get along with than an immodest person. However, Driver holds that modesty is *only* valuable for its positive social consequences, and it is here that I part with her view.

George Schueler has argued that the value of modesty cannot solely be the positive social consequences it elicits, because undetected false modesty can elicit the same positive social consequences as modesty, but false modesty is not considered a virtue. Moreover, there are many other positive character traits, such as sprightly wit, which have the same positive social consequences as modesty that are not considered virtues (Schueler 1999, 837). Hence, if modesty is valuable only for its positive social consequences, then undetected false modesty and sprightly wit should also be virtues insofar as they elicit the same positive social consequences. Moreover, undetected false modesty and sprightly wit should be virtues to the same degree as modesty, because they have the same amount of positive social consequences. But undetected false modesty and sprightly wit are not virtues; therefore, the value of modesty cannot solely be its positive social consequences.

Schueler has provided us with persuasive reasons to think of modesty as not solely valuable for the positive social consequences it brings forth. But what makes modesty intrinsically valuable? Before I delve into my own view, it will be fruitful to first explore Schueler's thoughts. Schueler maintains that modesty is intrinsically good "because of what it reveals about the person who has it, namely, that her goals and purposes come from herself, not from others. Someone who is genuinely modest is thus seen to have a kind of substance that the immodest person lacks" (839).¹⁷ Since the modest person's goals and purposes come from herself, she is indifferent to how others

¹⁷ It should be noted that this view is much different than Schueler's original position in "Why Modesty Is a Virtue" (1997), in which he argues that the value in being modest is that any desire to take credit for accomplishments would be illegitimate because of the numerous genetic, social, and cultural factors which contribute to our achievements (484).

view her accomplishments. This is important for Schueler, because Schueler holds that modesty involves: 1) having an accomplishment, and 2) being indifferent to how others evaluate this accomplishment (Schuler 1997, 479). Thus, his reasons for modesty being intrinsically valuable (i.e. that the goals and purposes come from herself) correspond to his indifference condition for modesty.

Here is an example, which better explains Schueler's account. Suppose John is a philosophy professor. If John is concerned to whether or not his accomplishments as a professor are viewed highly by his mother then John is not indifferent to how others view his accomplishments. Hence, John's goals and purposes do not come from himself, but come from his mother. According to Schueler, John would not be a modest person. Nonetheless, if John were indifferent to his mother's opinion of his accomplishments then his goals and purposes would come from himself. Thus, according to Schueler, John would be modest in this situation.

I agree with Schueler that modesty is intrinsically valuable. Accordingly, unlike Driver, I do not think that the value of modesty derives *solely* from its positive social consequences. However, unlike Schueler, I do not think modesty's intrinsic value comes from revealing that the goals and purposes of an individual come from herself. This does not characterize modesty as much as it characterizes something like originality or autonomy. For example, when someone accomplishes something great and sincerely says, "It was nothing," do we value this modest statement because it exemplifies the originality or autonomy of her goals and purposes, or for other reasons? My intuition is that we value this statement for reasons other than originality or autonomy.

I maintain that modesty is intrinsically valuable because it reveals that a person understands the global significance of his achievements accurately, given the evidence that is available to him.¹⁸ A modest person, hence, understands the place of his achievements and himself in the world. My thesis—that understanding the global significance of your achievements accurately has intrinsic value—corresponds to several philosophers' intuitions that the value of understanding and/or knowledge has intrinsic value.¹⁹ However, I am not arguing that modesty is valuable for epistemic reasons but I am arguing that it is valuable for moral reasons because of what it reveals about a person—that he understands his achievements globally.²⁰ Thus, I hold that modesty is both intrinsically valuable, and valuable for the positive social consequences it elicits.

II. Other Theories of Modesty

In this section, I am going to assess other theories of modesty and explain why my theory is superior to them. In doing this I will repeat some of the points made in the first section because they are relevant to this section.

1) Indifference:

G. F. Schueler holds that modesty involves: 1) having a genuine accomplishment, while 2) not caring about what others think of this accomplishment (Schuler 1997, 479).

¹⁸ I will address a potential objection to this view in section 3.4.

¹⁹ For instance, see Plato's *Meno*, Brogaard 2007, and Kvanvig 2003.

²⁰ Although it is my intuition that modesty has epistemic value, but I do not have the space to argue for this here.

Moreover, Schueler maintains that modesty is intrinsically valuable because it reveals that the modest person's goals and purposes come from herself.

I have already criticized Schueler's explanation for why modesty is a virtue, arguing in section 1.5, that Schueler is not describing modesty but something like originality or autonomy. Schueler's conditions for modesty are also flawed. One flaw is that on Schueler's account of modesty a person who is pleased that people give her compliments is immodest.²¹ However, this is quite counterintuitive insofar as it seems like someone can enjoy receiving compliments and still be modest. For example, imagine a high school runner—Gabe—is complimented by Michael Johnson, an Olympic gold medalist runner. After receiving a compliment, Gabe sincerely says, “Thank you very much! It means a lot that you think I am a good runner. But I still have a long way to go.” According, to Schueler's view Gabe is immodest because he cares that Michael Johnson thinks he is a good runner. Nevertheless, Gabe's comment seems rather modest. Therefore, indifference is not a necessary condition for modesty.

Another problem with Schueler's definition of modesty is that people who are extremely indifferent to how others view them are often immodest. For example, people who think that they are far superior to others, may disregard what others say to them. This kind of indifference is a form of immodesty. Consequently, Schueler does not provide a sufficient account of modesty.

Michael Ridge argues for a moderate version of Schueler's theory. Ridge unlike Schueler does not maintain that the modest person has to be indifferent to what others

²¹ Hans Maes makes a similar point to mine (Maes 487).

think of his accomplishments. Nonetheless, Ridge's view is similar to Schueler's theory insofar as he maintains that the modest person is: 1) disposed to de-emphasize the value of her achievements, 2) disposed to not care too much whether she is esteemed for her accomplishments and she doesn't care too much that she gets everything she is entitled to, and 3) disposed to care enough that people don't overestimate her accomplishments (Ridge 281). Ridge's conditions for modesty will become clearer as I criticize them in the following paragraphs.

Although Ridge's view is a definite improvement upon Schueler's, it too has its own distinct set of problems.²² Ridge in his first condition maintains that the modest person de-emphasizes his accomplishments. Ridge holds a weak interpretation of what it is for a modest person to de-emphasize his accomplishments. He states that "someone counts as modest just in case she is disposed not to go out of her way to emphasize her accomplishments" (272). Ridge admits that it is possible to meet this first condition and to be falsely modest. For instance, one can merely present himself as someone who de-emphasizes his accomplishments because he wants to be thought of as modest (271). Ridge does not believe that this poses a threat to his theory because he is arguing that the first condition is necessary but not sufficient for modesty. Ridge's first condition is rather uncontroversial; accordingly, we should turn our attention to his second condition.²³

Consider the latter part of condition two, which states that one should not care too much that she gets everything she is entitled to. Ridge illustrates this point with an

²² Note that Ridge and I hold different beliefs about the *success* condition; these differences will be addressed in section 3.3.

²³ We will not examine Ridge's third condition because I ultimately hold a similarly view. For a detailed account of my view on this matter see section 1.3.

example of a tall basketball player who emphasizes her height so that her coach does not cut her from the team. Speaking on this Ridge says:

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 (280).

Ridge's point here is a bit unclear. Is his point that caring too much about getting what we are entitled to constitutes immodesty? Or, is his point that caring too much about what we are entitled to might *lead us* to immodesty by leading us to inappropriately emphasize certain traits?

Either way Ridge's claim is misguided. For instance, if Ridge is making the latter claim then this is not a necessary condition for modesty because it merely might lead one to become immodest. Moreover, if Ridge is making the former claim then Ridge's claim is implausible. For example, suppose a basketball player constantly emphasized his height so that his coach would not cut him from the team. Now does the fact that the basketball player cares a lot about getting what he is entitled to by his height make him immodest? I do not think that it does. We often think that it is fair and just that one gets what one is entitled to. For instance, if a person has a certain achievement we think that it is fair that he receives the proper credit for his achievement; in other words, we think that it is fair that he gets what he is entitled to. Consequently, if this basketball player is immodest it is for reasons other than caring about getting what he is entitled to. He might be immodest, for instance, because he is dwelling on and talking about his traits too much.

The former part of condition two, which states that one should not care too much whether she is esteemed by others, is also mistaken. The problem with this condition is that one can be modest and care a great deal about being esteemed by others. For instance, suppose that Gabe—the high school athlete—really wants to impress his father by winning a race. In other words, Gabe really wants the esteem of his father. Does this make Gabe immodest? It is rather counterintuitive to think so. After all, a desire to impress or receive esteem from certain people, such as a parent, is quite natural. Furthermore, such a desire often brings about good consequences. For instance, because one wants the esteem of his parents, one will listen to them, and if his parents are wise, this will bring about good consequences. Another illustration of my argument is that a child who cares too much about the esteem of his parents, and thus always listens to them, is not necessarily immodest. We might say that the child lacks a certain amount of autonomy (depending on his age), but we would not call him immodest, this is unrelated. Moreover, modest people usually are happy to receive compliments and praise from others. Thus, it is counterintuitive to say that modest people should not want to be esteemed.

2) *Underestimation:*

Julia Driver argues that the modest person is disposed to underestimate her self-worth even in spite of the available evidence (Driver 1999, 830). Driver argues that her view is advantageous because it is able to separate false modesty from real modesty. She says:

On this account, the modest person underestimates his self-worth. If he speaks, then he understates the truth, but he does so unknowingly...this account seems plausible to me, because sincerity seems to be a necessary condition for genuine modesty, and the person who underestimates his self-worth is sincere in understanding it (Driver 1989, 376).

Consequently, for Driver if we are not ignorant of our successes then we cannot sincerely be modest about them. For example, if I know that I am a good runner and I say that I am only okay, then I am falsely modest. But if I really thought I was only okay and I really was good, then I would be modest. Additionally, Driver believes that a necessary condition for modesty is having an achievement that normally will cause envy in those around you (Driver 1999, 828).

There are a number of problems with Driver's underestimation account of modesty. I have already pointed out that her *success* condition is misguided because 1) actual success is not necessary for modesty, and 2) success should not be measured by whether or not others are envious of you.²⁴ The problem with making actual success a requirement is that people who are misinformed by the evidence around them seemingly can still be modest (e.g. Zooey and Jose). Moreover, if an accomplishment needs to generate envy then unknown geniuses cannot satisfy the *success* condition because others are not envious of their achievements (e.g. Charlotte and Van Gogh). The global

²⁴ For a more detailed argument against Driver's *success* condition see section 1.1

perspective theory of modesty overcomes this problem by maintaining that one only needs to believe with sufficient reason that he has success in order to be modest.

Also, my account of modesty is superior to Driver's because my theory provides better reasons for why modesty is a virtue.²⁵ Driver maintains modesty is only valuable for the positive social consequences it elicits. She holds, for instance, that modesty "oils the wheels" of social interaction by alleviating envy between people (Driver 1989, 384). I on the other hand, hold that modesty is both extrinsically and intrinsically valuable. The problem with thinking of modesty as only valuable for the social consequences it elicits is that undetected false modesty and real modesty have the same positive social consequences; thus, they should be equally valuable.²⁶ This is quite counterintuitive since we believe real modesty is superior to false modesty. This is especially problematic for Driver because she maintains that the advantage of her view is that it legitimately separates false modesty and real modesty. But under her theory, undetected false modesty and real modesty should be valued equally. Moreover, if modesty is only valuable for its positive social consequences then characteristics, such as sprightly wit, should also be virtues since they elicit the same positive social consequences as modesty. For instance, a witty individual can often ease social interaction between people. However, this is counterintuitive because sprightly wit is often not considered a virtue. The global perspective theory avoids these problems by holding that modesty is both extrinsically and intrinsically valuable.

²⁵ For a more thorough explanation of my reasons for modesty being a virtue see section 1.5

²⁶ George Schueler makes a similar point (Schueler 1999, 837)

Another problem is that it is easy to imagine someone who underestimates his self-worth and is still immodest. Hans Maes highlights this with his example:

Suppose for instance that the greatest philosopher in the world constantly underestimated himself as a result of his incapacity to judge the abilities of his colleagues. If he were to tell his students: 'I may not be the greatest philosopher in the world but I am a gifted thinker, and the next time I enter the classroom I expect applause' (Maes 485).

The global perspective theory is immune to problems like this because it has an *asymmetry* condition, which excludes modest people from bragging or dwelling on their accomplishments.

Moreover, it is hard to imagine that someone who is not ignorant of her skills is *ipso facto* not modest.²⁷ For example, imagine a child wins a science fair. All of the teachers and judges tell the student that his science project was very impressive and the best out of all the students. If the child accepts and understands the compliments from his teachers and judges, then under Driver's theory the child is *ipso facto* not modest. However, this appears too strong, it seems possible for the child to sincerely accept the compliments and praise with modesty, even if he fully understands his abilities.

Jason Brennan points out two additional powerful criticisms of Driver's underestimation account. The first critique is that virtues are traditionally considered stable and admirable dispositions but on Driver's account, the virtue of modesty is either

²⁷ Hans Maes makes a similar point to mine (Maes 485).

unstable, or stable and not admirable. Aristotle, for instance, thought that virtues were maintained by actively reflecting upon one's character. However, this is not possible on Driver's account insofar as once one reflects upon his good characteristics he is no longer modest because once one does this one is no longer ignorant of one's good characteristics. This demonstrates the instability of virtues on Driver's account insofar as a stable virtue would not be as ephemeral to disappear in a moment's thought. Moreover, on Aristotle's account of virtues, one's continuous search for the truth does not disrupt one's virtues, but on Driver's account, it does (Brennan 114). Accordingly, virtues for Driver are much more unstable than how they are traditionally thought to be.

However, Driver may object and assert that modesty is a stable virtue on her account. But where does this stability come from? In other words, how does a person remain ignorant of her abilities for an extended period, when she is constantly faced with evidence that speaks contrary to this belief? One possibility is that the modest person has some *strong* "skeptical beliefs" that cause her to disbelieve the evidence that is available to her (Brennan 115). Such a belief would be similar to a person who disbelieves that humans have landed on the moon even when faced with overwhelming evidence in favor of this being true. But if modesty is grounded in "skeptical beliefs" like this, then modesty does not appear to be admirable because one is dogmatically clinging to one's "skeptical beliefs" in the face of overwhelming counterevidence. This would make modesty quite counterintuitive because modesty is generally considered an admirable character trait and here it is not.

Another possibility is that modesty is stably grounded in an agent's emotional disposition. But what kinds of emotions would ground modesty? It seems that guilt would be a fitting emotion. An agent, for instance, may have been raised by her parents to experience feelings of guilt whenever she thinks too highly of herself. But the guilt cannot cause her to be overly self-deprecating or else Driver would not consider this a virtue. Another option is that the guilt causes an agent to overestimate the value of others; consequently, causing her to underestimate the value of herself (115). Hence, the guilty emotion experienced by an agent keeps her from coming to a correct estimation of her abilities and accomplishments, thereby stabilizing her virtue of modesty. However, guilt is a rather unappealing emotion to ground modesty in; hence, such a move would make modesty unattractive. Consequently, Driver faces a dilemma; either modesty is unstable, or stable and unattractive.

One might wonder why grounding a virtue in guilt is unattractive, perhaps this will become more lucid with an analogy from another virtue—courage. Imagine that there are two soldiers who act courageously. One soldier is driven to act courageously by guilt. For instance, he believes that if he does not act courageous right now, he will always feel guilty for not having done so. On the other hand, the second soldier's courageous behavior is not motivated by guilt, but is instead motivated by the value of courage. Intuitively the second soldier's attitude towards courage is much more attractive than the first soldier's attitude. Conceivably, this might be because the first soldier is acting courageously for somewhat selfish reasons (i.e. so that he will not feel guilty about it later) and grounding virtues in selfishness is not very attractive. But whatever the

specific reason, we intuitively find the second soldier's attitude much more attractive than the first soldier's attitude. From this, it follows that guilt is an unattractive position to ground modesty in.

The second critique Brennan makes is that the underestimation account of modesty does not mesh with our practice of criticizing vices and praising virtues. This practice is in part, meant to encourage a person to be virtuous and discourage them from vices. Yet, under Driver's conception of modesty, this practice is not effective. For example, Maud slightly underestimates her moral worth; thus, making her a modest agent on Driver's account. But after receiving praise for her modesty, Maud comes to realize her true moral worth, thereby making her immodest. Thus, receiving praise has made Maud morally worse (117). Moreover, on the underestimation account of modesty criticism does not discourage vices. For example, suppose Patrick is an extremely immodest person. But after hearing Maud receive praise for her modesty, Patrick is motivated to become modest himself. In attempting to become modest, Patrick reads Driver's book *Uneasy Virtue* and realizes that the only way for him to become modest is to deceive himself. However, this puts him in a dilemma since he cannot know if he has cultivated modesty, because if he were to know this, he would no longer be underestimating, and thus he could no longer be modest. Hence, criticizing Patrick for being immodest will not help him become modest; it will merely make him feel ashamed (117).

This displays two more advantages the global perspective theory of modesty has over Driver's theory—it is in harmony with our intuitions about virtues being stable and

attractive, and it meshes with our practice of praising virtues and criticizing vices. On the global perspective account, modesty is stable because it is a virtue that can be developed over time and continuously improved. This is very much unlike Driver's account, which is grounded in an inner disposition that one has little control over and can easily be lost. Moreover, the global perspective account is grounded in appealing features, such as understanding the global significance of your achievements. Additionally, on the global perspective account, praise and criticism can help one become modest; hence, the global perspective account of modesty meshes with our practice of praising virtues and criticizing vices.

3) *Two Standards:*

Jason Brennan argues for the two standards account of modesty. On this account, there are two standards that one compares his merit and character to: 1) the ideally virtuous person, the *phronimos*, and 2) the commonplace (118). The modest person, according to Brennan, sees herself under the first standard as falling short of the ideal. This motivates her to improve her abilities and character. When she assesses herself under the second standard, she recognizes that she is better than the majority of people. But having already seen her failings, she does not gloat, but feels compassion for others and is very forgiving of their shortcomings (119-121).

In Section 1.2, I mentioned that a problem with Brennan's theory is that we can easily think of people who are modest but do not compare their accomplishments to the ideal. For example, the world's fastest person appears modest when he says he does not

deserve all the credit for being the fastest person because there is great deal of luck that contributed to his success. Accordingly, this person appears modest despite not comparing himself to an ideal. Thus, Brennan's theory is grounded in something that is not necessary for modesty (comparison to the ideal). My theory avoids this problem by not identifying modesty with any single global perspective. Instead, my theory takes a disjunctive approach by maintaining that one needs an appropriate global perspective to be modest and an appropriate global perspective can be manifested in several ways.

4) Non-Overestimation

Owen Flanagan and Norvin Richards maintain that the modest person does not overestimate his accomplishments.²⁸ Speaking on this Richards says, “[Humility] involves having an accurate sense of oneself, sufficiently firm to resist pressures...to think *too much* of oneself” (Richards 254). Accordingly, an example of a modest person on the non-overestimation account would be someone who sees the worth of his accomplishments accurately.

One problem with this account of modesty is that it is easy to imagine someone who understands the worth of his achievements accurately but is still immodest. For example, suppose Fred is one of the greatest philosophers in the world and he constantly reminds everyone he meets of this fact. Fred appears immodest even though he is not overestimating his achievements. Another example of an immodest person who sees his achievements accurately would be Kevin from section 1.3. Recall that Kevin is a

²⁸ Note that Flanagan and Richards each reached this conclusion independent of each other. Also, note that Richards uses the term “humility,” which roughly means the same thing as the term “modesty.”

successful writer who knows he is not that great when compared to Shakespeare, but still brags about how he has sold a significant amount of books.²⁹

My account can handle this problem because on my account there is an *asymmetry* condition, which asserts that one cannot brag or dwell about his accomplishments. Thus, on my account of modesty a person who understands the worth of his accomplishments accurately but brags about his accomplishments is not modest.

A different kind of problem for the non-overestimation account is that a complete failure that has no achievements can be modest as long as she does not overestimate her accomplishments. Thus, Kyle—the complete failure from section 1.1—could be modest as long as he does not overestimate his achievements. This seems intuitively wrong because Kyle has nothing to be modest about. My theory is not susceptible to such a problem because on the global perspective account one must believe with sufficient reason that they have success. Accordingly, Kyle cannot have success on my account because he does not have sufficient reason to believe that he has success.³⁰

5) *Egalitarian*:

According to Aaron Ben-Ze'ev and Daniel Statman, modesty involves looking at human worth as an egalitarian. When one looks at human worth as an egalitarian, one sees his worth as a human being, as being equal to others. The egalitarian separates his accomplishments from his human worth. Thus, for an egalitarian, having great

²⁹ *Supra* footnote 11.

³⁰ In section 3.3, I address a possible objection to this argument.

accomplishments does not give one more moral value than other human beings with lesser achievements.

The problem with egalitarian theories of modesty is that one can be modest without being an egalitarian. Support for this claim comes from the example of the world's fastest person, who asserts that being the fastest person is not so important *sub specie aeternitatis*. Moreover, the world's fastest person does not brag or dwell on his success. Now imagine that the world's fastest human is not an egalitarian. Consequently, he holds that some people have more moral worth than other people. Despite not being an egalitarian, the fastest human is still modest. Being an egalitarian, hence, is not a necessary condition for modesty.

Now one might object that this argument depends on my example being an example of *focused* modesty, but this is not the case. We can easily adjust the example so that it also corresponds to *holistic* modesty. For instance, imagine a holistically modest person who has many accomplishments and holds appropriate global perspectives towards the majority of these achievements. It is quite possible that none of the corresponding global perspectives for this person is egalitarianism. This demonstrates that my argument is applicable to both focused and holistic modesty.

The global perspective theory avoids this problem by taking a disjunctive approach to modesty. Subsequently, on the global perspective theory a modest person must have a global perspective of his accomplishments. But what global perspective the modest person has depends on the context of the situation. Accordingly, on my account,

there are a many global perspectives that can be identified with modesty, but egalitarianism is just one of them.

An additional problem egalitarian theories encounter is that one can be an egalitarian and not be modest. For example, it is highly improbable that members of Amnesty International, an egalitarian non-profit organization, are always modest.³¹ This is because it is possible to be an egalitarian and to gloat. In fact, one can even revel in being an egalitarian or take delight in how wonderfully liberal one is. The global perspective theory avoids this problem by having an *asymmetry* condition, which states that a modest person does not dwell on or brag about her successes.

6) *Equity*:

A.T. Nuyen maintains that the modest person is equitable with respect to her achievements. Equity for Nuyen involves looking at the particular circumstances that surround your achievements. Because there are various circumstances which play a large role in one's achievements, looking at one's achievements with equity has a deflationary affect (Nuyen 106-107). An example of a modest person for Nuyen would be an Olympic runner who acknowledges that he would be nothing without his parents.

However, there are two problems with Nuyen's theory, one can be modest without being equitable, and one can be equitable without being modest; therefore, equity is not a necessary nor sufficient condition for modesty. For instance, a person would seem modest if they looked at her achievement *sub specie aeternitatis*, and did not brag

³¹ Hans Maes and Michael Ridge utilize similar examples in their respective works (Maes 487 & Ridge 270-271).

or dwell on her achievements. Such a person would be modest despite not being equitable towards her achievements. Moreover, a person can be equitable towards his achievements and not be modest. For example, recall Kevin from section 1.3. Kevin is a best selling author and he acknowledges that his parents helped shape him into the writer that he is today. Despite being equitable towards his achievements, Kevin immodestly brags to everyone he meets, that he has made a lot of money from selling a significant amount of his books. Consequently, equity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for modesty.

The global perspective theory avoids these problems by having a disjunctive *global perspective* condition, which can be manifested in many ways. Thus, on the global perspective theory modesty is not identified with any one perspective. Moreover, the global perspective theory has an *asymmetry* condition, which excludes people like Kevin from being modest.

7) *Asymmetry*:

Hans Maes argues that “what is essential to modesty is a certain self-other asymmetry, an asymmetry between what others can say or think about a person and what the person can say or think about himself” (Maes 489). The global perspective theory of modesty is quite close to Maes’ theory. However, the global perspective theory maintains two important distinctions between itself and Maes’ theory. The first distinction is that the global perspective theory holds a *success* condition, which Maes’ theory does not. The second distinction is that on the global perspective account, having a *global perspective* is

a necessary condition for modesty, but under Maes' theory, it is not.³² The advantage of including the global perspective as a necessary condition is that it can separate false modesty from true modesty. For example, someone may politely respond, "Oh it was nothing," when he is complimented on his achievements. However, such a person could only be feigning modesty. But if this response was grounded in a global perspective then the modesty is sincere. Accordingly, having a global perspective condition separates false modesty from real modesty. Consequently, without an explicit *global perspective* condition, it is unclear how Maes separates false modesty from sincere modesty.

III. Objections and Replies

1) *Why Sufficient Belief in Success?*

Although I have shown why actual success is not needed for modesty, one may still wonder why believing with sufficient reason in a success is necessary for modesty. Accordingly, why won't any belief in success do?

To answer this question I will utilize the example of Jose—the GRE test taker from section 1.1. Recall that after Jose took the test the computer screen displayed that he had received perfect scores. However, the screen only displayed these scores because of a computer glitch. In actuality, Jose scored the lowest possible score on the test. In section 1.1 I argued that Jose satisfies the success condition because the available evidence

³² Although, it should be noted that Maes does mention that having a global perspective will help separate true modesty from false modesty. Nonetheless, he does not explicitly make the global perspective a necessary condition for modesty nor does he explicitly use the term global perspective. My theory, hence, is further development of some of the implicit ideas in Maes' theory.

provides him with sufficient reason for believing that he has success. Now imagine that there was no computer glitch and the computer screen revealed his actual scores. If Jose fully understands how low his scores are, can he still be modest about his scores? I argue that he cannot because these scores are nothing to be modest about. Support for this claim is that any “modest” statement that he could say or think would not make much sense. For example, imagine him saying, “I’m smart, but I’m not that smart compared to Albert Einstein.” This statement is more humorous than modest. It is for reasons like this that any belief in success will not satisfy the success condition for modesty. Hence, a modest person must have sufficient belief that he has success.

One might object by arguing that although it seems silly for a person to assert this, such a person is still modest for asserting it. In responding to this objection, I would like to point out that I argued that modesty is intrinsically valuable because it reveals that a person understands the global significance of her achievements accurately based upon the available evidence. Thus, if one fails to understand the evidence that is available to her, then one cannot be modest. Therefore, if one is to be modest one must believe with sufficient reason that one has a success.

2) Does Having a Global Perspective Involve Deception?

Daniel Statman, in arguing against Norvin Richards’ and Owen Flanagan’s non-overestimation account of modesty, asserts that keeping one’s merits in perspective “is sometimes merely a new form of self-deception” (Statman 428). Statman elucidates this point with an example. He says:

Suppose human worth could be measured on a quantitative scale.

And suppose one has gained 90 points out of 100. Why do we consider that the right perspective is to stress the ten missing points which hardly anyone has ever gained, and not the 90 which one actually gained while the human average is only 60? (427).

Consequently, does having a global perspective force one to deceive himself into thinking that his achievements have less value than they do?³³

The answer to the above question is no. As stated in section 1.2 what qualifies as an appropriate global perspective is contingent upon the context of the situation. Accordingly, if someone's has gained 90 points on the quantitative scale, taking a global perspective of this achievement does not necessarily mean focusing on the 10 points that they do not have. The right global perspective for this person might be to look at the circumstances that surround his success, or maybe, the right perspective for this person involves looking at his achievements in comparison to the ideal, or perhaps it involves having both perspectives. Thus, taking a global perspective does not force one into deceiving himself, but enlightens one of his global significance.

However, one may object by arguing that there may be an individual who is so great that having a global perspective would not help him be modest. For example, there might be a man who is so great that understanding the global significance of his

³³ Of course, this problem could easily be avoided by taking the egalitarian approach (which is what Statman does) i.e. is separating moral worth from the value of achievements. However, if I do this, then the other global perspectives lose some of their value. Consequently, I will answer this question by excluding egalitarianism as a global perspective; thereby, showing that this question does not pose a threat to the integrity of the other global perspectives. Also, note that Statman primarily addresses this question at the global perspective of looking at your achievements *sub specie aeternitatis*, but I am addressing this question to all the perspectives except egalitarianism.

achievements would not help him be modest because his achievements truly are heads above everyone else's achievements.

Before I respond to this objection, let us first look at the conditions a person would have to meet for a global perspective not to affect her. For this to be possible a person would have to: 1) have accomplishments and character which are almost equal in degree to the ideal, 2) be solely responsible for all of her achievements i.e. no one has helped her in any significant way through the entire course of her life, 3) have accomplishments which are extremely significant *sub specie aeternitatis*. Such a being seems more supernatural than human. Why should we expect the conditions of a virtue to be the same for a supernatural being as they are for a human being? For example, Aristotle said that the virtue of courage is the golden mean between fear and recklessness with the courageous man fearing and enduring the right things (*EN. III 7. 1115b*). Accordingly, it is appropriate for a courageous human being to experience some degree of fear. However, supernatural beings (e.g. God) do not experience fear (or at the very least, do not experience fear in the same phenomenological way as humans do). Thus, if fear is a condition for courage, then God cannot be courageous. Because God cannot be courageous under this account of courage, does this mean that this account is theoretically damaged? My intuition is no, because God and humans are two distinctly different kinds of beings. Similarly, my account of modesty is not injured because God cannot be modest under its conditions.

3) *Success Condition?*

In section 1.1 I have argued that a modest person must have a reasonable belief in some success to be modest. Michael Ridge, however, thinks otherwise. Ridge makes this point by asking us to consider a person who has not achieved anything worthy of calling a genuine accomplishment. Such a person, Ridge argues, can be modest because “modesty fundamentally consist[s] in being disposed (for the right reasons) to react appropriately to what, if anything, one takes to be one’s accomplishments” (Ridge 280). Ridge, therefore, is asserting (contrary to me) that modesty does not need a *success* condition. Ridge supports this claim by arguing that a solitary man on an island can still be honest and that a person can still be courageous, despite never facing any danger (280). So, similarly, a person without any accomplishments can still be modest (so long as she has the right dispositions).

However, I disagree with Ridge. For instance, I do not believe that a solitary man on an island can be honest insofar as honesty involves a relation between individuals. Thus, one cannot practice honesty without another individual being present. Consequently, one may have a disposition to be honest but unless one actually practices honesty, one does not have the virtue of honesty. Likewise, courage involves a relation to danger (or fear); hence, one cannot be courageous unless one faces danger (or fear). Therefore, one may have the disposition to be courageous but unless one actually practices courage, one does not have the virtue of courage. Similarly, one cannot be modest without practicing modesty and since modesty involves a relation to success, one cannot practice modesty without having “success.”

With respect to this issue, my view is quite Aristotelian. For example, Aristotle maintained that virtues are a golden mean between two relations. Aristotle, for instance, held that courage is a mean between fear and confidence (*EN*. III 6-7). Relatedly, for Aristotle the courageous man experiences an appropriate amount of fear. Speaking on this, Aristotle says, “He is courageous who endures and fears the right things, for the right motive, the right manner, and at the right time, and who displays confidence in a similar ways” (*EN*. III 7. 1115b). Hence, being courageous for Aristotle involves experiencing fear.

Moreover, Aristotle held that one must practice her virtuous character traits in order to have the virtue of these traits. For example, Aristotle said:

Just as the crown at the Olympic Games is not awarded to the most beautiful and the strongest but to the participants in the contests—for it is among them that the victors are found—so the good and noble things in life are won by those who *act* rightly (*EN*. I 8.1099a, emphasis added).

Consequently, it is not merely enough to have the disposition to act virtuously; one must *actually* act virtuously in order to be virtuous. Therefore, if one is to have the virtue of modesty one must have a reasonable belief in success, because without this, one will not be able to act modestly insofar as one will have nothing to be modest about.

An advantage of thinking about modesty my way is that my account of modesty can explain our intuition that it is greater when a highly accomplished person is modest than when a person with mediocre achievements is modest, while Ridge’s account of

modesty cannot. My theory of modesty can explain this intuition because on my account “success” is a necessary condition for modesty. Moreover, I argue that the more “success” one has the greater in degree one can be modest. It is not clear how Ridge, without a success condition, can account for this intuition.

4) Does the Global Perspective Account Value Reasonable Belief or Accuracy?

One might object that because I maintain that modesty’s intrinsic value derives from it revealing that a person understands the global significance of his achievements accurately, I am in a dilemma. The dilemma is that on one hand, I am saying that modesty is valuable because one sees his achievements accurately. But on the other hand, my *success* condition does not necessarily involve accuracy. It instead involves reasonable belief. Thus, how is it that I can coherently say modesty is valuable because it reveals that one sees his achievements accurately and at the same time say that a modest person does not have to see his achievements accurately, he merely has to have a reasonable belief of them?

In responding to this objection, I would like to point out that I maintain modesty has intrinsic value because it reveals that a person understands the global significance of his achievements accurately based upon the available evidence. This is different than asserting that modesty has intrinsic value because it reveals that a person understands the global significance of his achievements accurately. The difference is that the former refers to accuracy as things appear to a person, while the latter refers to how things actually stand. Hence, this assertion—that modesty has intrinsic value because it reveals

that a person understands the global significance of his achievements accurately based upon the available evidence—does not conflict with my assertion that a modest person merely has to have a reasonable belief, because a reasonable belief should correspond to the available evidence. Moreover, I am arguing that modesty is valuable for moral reasons because it reveals that one is the kind of person who views his “successes” globally. Consequently, I am not arguing that modesty is valuable for epistemic reasons; hence, there is no contradiction in my claim. Furthermore, this claim—that modesty is valuable because it reveals that a person understands the global significance of his achievements accurately based upon the available evidence—is quite innocent. After all, we might all be victims of a Cartesian demon.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have offered an alternative account of modesty. On my account, a person *P* is modest if and only if:

- 1) She believes with sufficient reason that she has success in one focused area.
- 2) She has a global perspective of this success.
- 3) She does not dwell on or brag about this success and she cares enough that others do not brag about this success.

Modesty defined as such is both extrinsically and intrinsically valuable. Its extrinsic value derives from the positive social consequences that it elicits, while its intrinsic value derives from revealing that the person who holds this virtue is a certain kind of person.

Namely, that she is the kind of person who understands the global significance of her achievements with respect to the available evidence.

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