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Modesty

IF YOU WERE RAISED like me, you were taught that good people should never sing their own praises. I remember my mother pointing to Muhammad Ali when I was a boy as a lesson in how *not* to behave. The lessons I absorbed concerned the inner life, how good people should think about themselves and their own gifts and accomplishments. Modest people, so went the message, not only refrain from bragging and boasting, but they somehow think less about themselves. Somewhere along the line I found that I liked Ali, and truth be told, I found him fascinating for his brashness. My interest in Ali raises the question whether I gave up on modesty or whether I came to see Ali or modesty in a new light, one that allowed me to endorse modesty without thinking less of Ali. I think the latter is so, and I shall try to explain how it might be so. Many portrayals rule out a modest person making or endorsing anything along the lines of Ali's bold claims. Some accounts rule out modest people believing that their gifts, powers, and achievements are good, much less the very best. Others allow for this belief, but temper any sense of accomplishment. Compared to an ideal of perfection or judged against a divine or cosmic scale, our greatest accomplishments are said to provide us with no reason to brag or gloat; from a God's-eye point of view, our achievements and attributes are puny. And even if our attributes and accomplishments are best viewed against a human scale, perhaps our moral equality dwarfs the ways in which we are dissimilar, thereby ruling out an inflated image of ourselves. Still other accounts permit beliefs about one's own excellence and allow for one's accomplishments mattering, but any interest in getting credit and honour for the same is ruled out. Hence, a truly modest person might prize the accomplishment, but wouldn't be given to inner pride, much

less public expressions of the same. And along with this view, perhaps proper attention to responsibility would temper our sense of desert where our gifts and accomplishments are concerned.

While modest people may be unlikely to make Ali's claims, we should embrace a conception of modesty that allows for a modest person believing and making such claims in *certain* contexts. Modesty is a virtue, and a more important one than most people realize. But modesty is compatible with the acknowledgement and even celebration of human accomplishments and attributes, including one's own. Both we *and* Ali can celebrate his powers without automatically giving up on modesty.

Let me first examine and discuss some flaws in competing conceptions. I'll call these accounts the "Ignorance Account," the "Perfectionist Account," the "Moral Equality Account," and the "No Credit Account." These conceptions are all flawed, but they are not wildly implausible, and an understanding of the subtle ways in which they go astray paves the way for a better conception of modesty, one that is truer to what we are after when we describe it as a virtue.

The guiding thoughts behind the ignorance account are that modesty cannot be fleshed out *entirely* in terms of behaviour, and that modesty must have something important to do with beliefs. Thus, merely refraining from behaviour like gloating or bragging isn't sufficient for modesty. Were behaviour all that mattered in this respect, "Ron doesn't brag, but Ron is not modest" would be a contradiction, and surely we do not treat it as such.¹ The belief at work in this view of modesty is the conviction that one's talents, accomplishments, and attributes are *modest* in the sense that houses or incomes can be modest. We mean that these things are nothing special, that they deserve no special attention, credit, or honour. Hence, modest people are not prone to bragging, gloating, or putting on airs like immodest people simply because from their own point of view, they really have little to crow about.

Of course, some people might believe that their accomplishments and attributes are meagre and they might be *correct*. In this case, we might jest that someone has a lot to be modest about. Since a very meagre estimation might be a correct one, let's say

¹ Julia Driver, "The Virtue of Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 375.

that this conception of modesty requires ignorance and underestimation with respect to one's own *genuine* merits and worth. A modest person truly underestimates how good she really is, unlike the person who correctly assesses that she is nothing special. Modest people, therefore, are just wrong about themselves. As Julia Driver puts it, "A truly modest person would simply not believe that he was that good. In a way, modesty can be characterized as *a dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth.*" The purported value of this kind of ignorance and the disposition toward the same, what makes them virtuous, is said to be that the "reluctance to take in one's own accomplishments fully, to avoid adding up one's worth ... leads to an alleviation of the more destructive competitive emotions like jealousy and envy."² Hence, even if modest people are gifted in many ways, their ignorance tempers envy.

Notice that if this is the best account of modesty, it would be a curious account of a virtue. The possession of a virtue is an *accomplishment*, one that usually requires at least some conscious oversight and effort, at least at some point in the inculcation of the trait. Genuine virtue rarely comes easily. Characteristically, we need to pay some attention to shape our character for the better. If modesty requires ignorance, it is hard to see how modesty could ever redound to someone's credit. Perhaps the active element at work in modesty could be self-deception or willed ignorance, but it would seem odd to herald a person on this score. And unless there is some other active element in the sustenance of modesty's stubborn underestimation, the ignorance at the heart of modesty would have to be a sheer accident, an instance of nothing more than happenstance. In the case of modesty as ignorance, we would be faced with the odd result that we could always take away someone's virtue by *making* them face up to the facts, thereby causing the modest person's fall from the innocence of ignorance. Maybe we could imagine an accomplished, talented person with special attributes obstinately refusing to acknowledge her own worth and merits even in the face of overwhelming evidence, but we would wonder how such resistance could be sustained and why it might be a good thing. Generally we need the capacity to judge our-

² "The Virtue of Ignorance" 378, 383.

selves and others accurately against a whole litany of standards. If modesty requires a general inability to judge everything from courage, kindness, fairness, intelligence, and beauty, to the broad gamut of human talents great and small, then surely any social advantages to modesty would be more than offset by corresponding losses. Such ignorance would most likely undermine us as practical agents, making it impossible to discriminate accurately between good and bad, better and worse. And if modest people are not pervasively blind and instead are somehow able to assess others but only others accurately, what should systematically prevent them from accurately assessing themselves?

Furthermore, there is no inherent danger or drawback to modest people seeing themselves clearly. If it were true that human beings slid into arrogance and prideful contempt whenever they deemed themselves good or better, there might be a reasonable trade in purchasing modesty's ignorance at the expense of self-knowledge. But surely the choice here isn't an inevitable one between ignorance and immodesty.

On the other hand, while we shouldn't account for modesty in terms of ignorance, we shouldn't require absolute accuracy with respect to self-knowledge. I see no reason why modest people can't sometimes be blind to some degree so far as their own worth and merits are concerned. Eventually I shall suggest that a modest person's orientation and way of life discourage the sort of preoccupation with the self that might well be necessary for absolute accuracy with respect to one's own standing. However, if the degree of ignorance is very great at all, we should refrain from attributions of modesty and at best, make counterfactual guesses about what this person would be like were she to know her true worth and merits. Ultimately, modesty is best fleshed out in terms that may often seem functionally equivalent to ignorance in some respects. Nonetheless, we should avoid making ignorance the fundamental feature of modesty, at least if we wish to paint modesty as a virtue. If the main advantage of modesty were its power to mitigate socially destructive forces like envy, the same results could surely be achieved without the heavy price of ignorance. Strict rules against bragging, boasting, gloating, or showing others up, along with a well-entrenched disposition to downplay one's own merits and worth, would accomplish the very same results as ignorance without the pitfalls of ignorance. We must keep in mind that what

people envy about the more gifted is not the gifted person's cognizance of her own merits and worth. Rather, envious people envy what she is, what she has, what she has done. Ignorance on the part of the gifted may ease the sting of inferiority by mitigating the worry that betters will throw their superiority in the face of inferiors, but it won't change the fact that they are still betters. Moreover, if betters are completely oblivious to how they are better or just how much better they are, this ignorance will likely increase the odds of unintentionally embarrassing and humiliating inferiors.

The next account of modesty, the perfectionist account, rejects the idea that ignorance and underestimation play a vital role in modesty. Accurate estimation (or avoiding overestimation) is at the heart of modesty. This portrayal insists that an appreciation of the big picture with respect to our accomplishments and gifts would ultimately humble us.³ After all, compared to some ideal of absolute perfection, we are nothing to write home about. For the most part, no matter how accomplished we may be or how wonderful our attributes, we can find someone who surpasses us. And even if we get to the point where we are the absolute best, we can conceive of some ideal standard that we fail to embody: we can't run *that* fast, jump *that* far, hit *those* notes, prove *that* theorem, or solve *that* fundamental riddle of the universe.

Moreover, even if we somehow embodied absolute perfection in some regard, we could find other ways in which we would certainly pale. Even those who are as good as it gets can hardly be as good as it gets at everything that matters. When we consider the range of human capacities and attributes, we realize that we can at best perfect a small number, if we can perfect any. And this account of modesty suggests that this realization provides a sobering perspective: No matter how good you may be, there are always a great many more things that you are *not* good at. Thus, modest people temper the inclination to sing their own praises by reminding themselves that they miss more pitches than they hit. Modest people are said to have a very accurate view of their own gifts and accomplishments juxtaposed against the backdrop of human possibilities.

³ For views that run along these lines, see Norvin Richards, *Humility* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992) and Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 420–28.

Furthermore, even were it possible to embody *all* ideals of human perfection, these ideals would still be limited. Human lives and powers are by nature limited in scope and duly characterized by their finitude. All we need consider by comparison is some divine or cosmic order. Michelangelo painted a beautiful Sistine Chapel, but by comparison, God created the Grand Canyon. Likewise, even if I am big stuff in my corner of the earth, in the grand scheme of vast cosmic space and time, *any* human life is little more than a speck of cosmic dust. Hence, when we see where we really fit into this big picture, we are less likely to think that we have very much to gloat about. An accurate assessment of our merits and worth should reveal how modest they really are and this realization keeps modest people's self-assessments in check.

The problem with this conception of modesty is that it either goes too far, or doesn't go far enough to account for modesty as a virtue. Consider how it might not go far enough. Assume that we are talking about an accomplished, gifted person, even if this person is not the absolute best in any respect. Suffice it to say that this person ranks high on the human scale for many accomplishments and attributes. As she looks about the world, she realizes that she cannot run like a gazelle, sing like a nightingale, or hurl thunderbolts like Zeus. Maybe she knows that she can't even do simple math well. I see no reason why her recognition of divine or cosmic standards, or for that matter, human standards of perfection that she fails to embody, need keep her from the conclusion that she is just swell on any reasonable human standard. If reminded of all the ways in which she falls short of complete perfection, divine or otherwise, she could still gloat that she is far better than the vast majority of people in a whole bunch of ways.

All this is not to say that we should not take due note of our place in the grand order of things, or that if and when we do, we won't be chastened to some degree or other. I am merely saying that so far as modesty is concerned, I see no reason to think that the fundamental standard of excellence and importance for humans should be a non-human one. And if not, then someone could believe that she doesn't amount to much in the grand scheme of things, and simultaneously believe that she is God's greatest gift to humanity.

Nonetheless, assume that there is something about this big-picture perspective that is psychologically compelling and that

thwarts immodesty. In this case, the problem is that it is hard to see how taking the divine, cosmic, or perfectionist standard to heart would avoid going too far. On any such scale, the difference between those who are really good by human standards is bound to matter very little when compared to the most rigorous standard. The difference between (Olympic speedster) *Carl* Lewis and (comedian) *Jerry* Lewis is tiny when juxtaposed to the gigantic difference between their respective running speeds and the speed of light. I will not deny that human beings sometimes adopt such perspectives at various moments and that so doing may moderate their own sense of importance and accomplishment. Neither will I deny that human beings sometimes do well to do so. However, I do not believe that many people live their lives from this kind of perspective, and moreover, this *is a* good thing. The more seriously this perspective is taken, the more it would devalue and undermine our lives.

We should avoid the conclusion that modesty warrants this pessimistic attitude because we should not grant the assumption I granted earlier. Though we can take the big-picture perspective, this point of view is not the guiding light for evaluating our lives. We can take this perspective and still manifest attitudes and behaviour that we all characteristically think of as immodest. So long as I accurately assess my accomplishments and attributes by pertinent human standards, there is no reason why I couldn't fully acknowledge the big picture and nonetheless throw my significant gifts and achievements in others' faces.

I have little doubt that many modest people may indeed often be given to thoughts about how even their prodigious gifts and accomplishments fall short of absolute perfection, thoughts about how their range of worth and merit is limited, and thoughts about the small place of human beings in the big picture. But even if this is so, we should avoid locating the essence of modesty in such convictions. Either these convictions are insufficient for guaranteeing what we are after in modesty, or else they throw the baby out with the bathwater by preventing immodesty at the price of rendering all human gifts, achievements, and endeavours meagre and pathetic.

The third account of modesty, the moral equality account, directs attention away from our accomplishments and attributes in favour of our most essential *moral* attribute: our equal moral sta-

tus.⁴ No matter how superior we may be, we share a fundamental common moral denominator as human beings. This conception of modesty eliminates or at least tempers attitudes aimed at distinguishing some people. However, unlike a big-picture perspective, this conception deflates the importance of our gifts and accomplishments by appeal to something else about us, rather than by appeal to anything above or beyond us. According to this conception, our fundamental equality may not be the only thing that counts, but it dwarfs everything else for a modest person.

Hence, this account of modesty hinges on a particular evaluative framework embraced and manifested by a modest person. Modest people simply never lose sight of the way in which we are all morally important, and equally so. This cognizance eliminates any tendency toward gloating or wallowing in one's own grandeur. After all, no matter how splendid we may be in some respects, in the final analysis we are still human beings, no better or worse than our less gifted or accomplished brothers and sisters. This same conviction rules out insensitively thrusting our own glories in the face of others less fortunate. So doing would be disrespectful and nothing short of a repudiation of the twin ideas that we are all morally equal and that this is what counts most about us.

At first glance, my guess is that most everyday reactions to immodest people seem to corroborate this account of modesty. When immodest people incorrectly believe that they are wonderful, perhaps we tend to dismiss their immodesty with a laugh or derisive comment about their foolish image of themselves. But if we move beyond our urge to laugh at their pretension, we might well react the same way we often react to immodest people who are genuinely gifted and accomplished. Victims of gratuitous immodesty often complain about immodest offenders thinking they are so much better and more important than the common folk. Such affronts feel like an attack on one's fundamental worth, and a conception of modesty fleshed out in terms of moral equality would predict as much. Immodest people inflate the importance of their gifts and accomplishments relative to the far greater importance of our shared, equal moral status. On the other hand, modest people

⁴ For an account of this sort, see Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, "The Virtue Of Modesty," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993): 235-46.

are properly committed to the latter, and unsurprisingly, this commitment is said to encourage a more compassionate identification with others since the ways in which are all alike loom largest in a modest person's field of view.

In response to this picture, I admit that immodesty is disrespectful when it raises and celebrates the self at the expense of others. Modest people refrain from disrespect, and do so for reasons that go beyond shyness. Modest people have no interest in purchasing praise and glory at the expense of others. The cognizance of what we all share, including the capacity for psychological pain in the face of our own perceived inferiority, is usually an operative thought in the constellation of a modest person's character. The image of modest people sometimes reminding those deeply impressed by their gifts and accomplishments that we all put our pants on one leg at a time resonates deeply with our intuitive idea of modesty.

Nevertheless, a well-settled belief in moral equality and a commitment to the same are neither necessary nor sufficient for modesty. Imagine a community where moral *inequality* is a fundamental axiom. Assume that community members believe that a divine being endowed some with far greater worth. I see no reason why these superior beings couldn't embody many of the attitudes, inclinations, thoughts, desires, and actions we expect in modest people. True enough, when refraining from basking in their own glory the operative factor would not be a belief in moral equality, but this fact alone begs the question. Such beings could rein in any temptation to emphasize their superiority for fear that so doing would painfully remind others of their subordinate status. Fully believing that others are worth less, they might nonetheless wish that others were worth more and might treat them as if they were. Moreover, they might scrupulously avoid dwelling on their own superiority not just to assuage the mental states of subordinate beings, but also for intrinsic reasons having nothing to do with sparing others. Fully convinced of their own superiority, they might have little interest in thinking about themselves, much less basking in self-infatuation. Though I haven't yet defined modesty, we can imagine these superior beings looking a whole lot like what we intuitively expect of a modest person. Whether such supposedly superior beings would actually incline in this direction is an open question. But my point here is that even if this is true, we

can imagine someone swimming upstream toward modesty even in the face of such a conviction.

Furthermore, I don't think that we have to think very hard to imagine an immodest person with a well-settled belief in and commitment to moral equality. In this case, the critical factor would be the interpretation of what we mean by moral equality being most fundamental. An immodest person could certainly agree that our equal moral status entitles everyone to some level of basic respect. However, admitting that equal respect is fundamental or absolutely important is not the same thing as saying that moral equality dwarfs all other values. An immodest person could admit that moral equality counts for a whole lot and thereby commands respect for others in various ways, and yet this person might insist that if all you have to your credit is your moral equality, then you haven't much to be proud of.

An immodest person who runs roughshod over others could hardly profess a genuine commitment to moral equality, so perhaps immodesty is more closely linked to a failure to acknowledge moral equality than my comments suggest. However, an immodest person could compartmentalize immodest behaviour in such a way as to take into account moral equality for what it is worth, but only for what it is worth. In certain contexts a thoroughly immodest person might steadfastly defend moral equality and scrupulously avoid any imputation of superiority. But this same person might insist that basic respect doesn't count for much in other arenas.

I acknowledge the moral importance that we all share simply as human beings. Nonetheless, neither have I any doubt that few of us would find much solace in the thought that all we have going for ourselves is our status as human beings. Our solemn attachment to this equal status may well rule out all sorts of things *no matter what*. But this is a far cry from relegating other gifts and accomplishments to a minor realm. Our status as equally worthy human beings is usually our last refuge, hauled out primarily when others ignore or threaten us in serious ways. Under less perilous circumstances, other things are sources of meaning and value in our lives. Modest and immodest people are alike in this sense. The essential difference between them does not rest in the fact that only the former truly embrace a commitment to moral equality.

The final competing account of modesty, the no credit account, rejects the claim that underestimation is essential to mod-

esty, along with the idea that an appreciation of some big picture would rightly deflate any sense of the worth of human accomplishments. This conception commands genuine accomplishments and a cognizance of the same as essential for modesty. The key ingredient to add to these elements for an account of modesty is a disinterest in *credit* or *recognition* for one's accomplishments. As one philosopher puts it, "Someone who is genuinely modest is someone who doesn't care whether people are impressed with her for her accomplishments. That is, she lacks a certain desire or set of desires, namely, that people be impressed by her for what she has accomplished."⁵ This needn't entail that a modest person doesn't care at all about how others regard her or her accomplishments. This point of view means that a modest person is indifferent to how people regard her as the "producer of accomplishments." The most basic idea is that a modest person should care deeply *only* about the true worth of accomplishments. A modest writer might care desperately about what critics have to say about her writing, but only because she cares deeply about the quality of the writing itself. The modest writer only cares about what others have to say about her writing because they may have some important insight into the quality of her work.

Thus, modest people are said to deflect attention and adulation away from themselves as the producers of accomplishments and toward the quality of their accomplishments because the worth of the accomplishment itself is the essential thing. This disposition to shun credit and recognition goes beyond sheer outward behaviour. G.F. Schueler points out that a person who always avoids boasting and other immodest ways, but does so for reasons other than being disinterested in recognition, would not be modest if she were internally thrilled by recognition and adulation. As he says, an inner life that includes any interest in recognition "is not the inner life of a genuinely modest person, no matter what her public behavior might lead us to think."⁶ According to Schueler, so-called *false* modesty entails feigning disinterest in credit and recognition when one is actually interested in the same.

⁵ G.F. Schueler, "Why Modesty is a Virtue," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 478.

⁶ "Why Modesty is a Virtue" 481.

So far as the virtue or excellence of a well-entrenched disposition of this sort is concerned, this account bears some resemblance to the big-picture perspective. However, this account emphasizes the issue of credit, rather than the deflation of the worth of accomplishments themselves. Schueler suggests that modest people have a more realistic and accurate appreciation of *desert*: "it is difficult to resist the thought that if someone knew enough about how one came to produce some accomplishment (whether a discovery, a witticism, or a backhand winner down the line), none of the essential explanatory factors would be things for which one could fairly claim any credit."⁷ Schueler recognizes the difficulty of refraining from claiming or desiring such credit. Nevertheless, modest people silence this "illegitimate," though common desire, and thereby manifest a more accurate appreciation of the relationship between their accomplishments and their own purported merits as producers of accomplishments.

The first thing to notice about this account of modesty is the difficulty of accommodating the range of things about which people can be modest or immodest under the description of an "accomplishment." We experience a range of emotions of self-assessment with respect to all sorts of things that we would not ordinarily describe as an accomplishment. When thinking about a physically beautiful person with a lovely singing voice, a graceful body, and a temperament that inclines toward warmth, compassion, and loving fidelity, we wouldn't ordinarily praise this person for her accomplishments, particularly if we believed that she did little or nothing by way of conscious effort or oversight to come by these gifts. Ordinarily, we can praise and admire these attributes, and understand some degree of pride on the gifted's part, despite the fact that these gifts may not be earned. In this case, we might not give her credit, but this wouldn't stop us from honouring her, and the honour wouldn't usually reduce to an impersonal appreciation of the attributes themselves.

This may seem like a minor point, perhaps just a slight revision to Schueler's analysis of modesty. But it reveals something important about this picture of modesty. When talking about accomplishments, it often makes a great deal of sense to separate

⁷ "Why Modesty is a Virtue" 484.

concerns for an accomplishment itself and concerns for recognition as the producer of an accomplishment. We can think of cases where people seem primarily interested in recognition rather than the accomplishment itself, and in such cases, something often seems amiss. If I am saving the Amazon rainforest or finding a cure for AIDS, then assuming that I have an intrinsic interest in these things, who achieves the result or gets the credit should pale in comparison with the goal. But notice two important points. First, most people with intrinsic interests in bringing about states of affairs usually have an interest both in the accomplishment *and* in being the producer of the accomplishment. Even those relatively or absolutely uninterested in recognition from others still usually derive some satisfaction from their own recognition of themselves as the producer of prized accomplishments. I want my daughters to grow up into strong, loving, talented, well-adjusted women, but I am not indifferent to whether or not I have a hand in helping them. If I should ultimately prove to be a good father and help bring this about, my part in the process will count. And were I to fail in this regard, even if the failure proved no fault of my own and even if someone else took up the slack, this failure would still have a deep, pervasive effect on me.

Furthermore, when it comes to all sorts of attributes (beauty, strength, intelligence, creativity, prized character traits and qualities) and our interest in the same, it seems even harder to focus on the importance of these attributes without also paying attention to their embodiment in a particular person. Even if we care about things like beauty, grace, wit, strength, intelligence, and good character in some abstract sense, surely we care very much about their particular geographical location. Those who are lucky enough to embody these attributes and powers ordinarily are proud of this fact, even if they are not given to wearing their pride on their sleeves, and even if they seldom consciously dwell on these attributes as their attributes. But they will not separate these attributes from their "self" based upon the possibility that they were not responsible for these attributes. Surely desert is not the only issue where pride is concerned.

Of course, the mere fact that people in ordinary life evaluate themselves and others along various lines that need not invoke desert and credit doesn't mean that such evaluation is appropriate. People can gloat about all sorts of things, and maybe on closer

inspection, they have very little reason to do so. Perhaps we should feel pride and the like only when we deserve credit, and maybe it is true that if we understood the causal mechanisms at work in what we do and are, we would understand that we can claim little credit for our greatest accomplishments. In this case, we can still evaluate and prize accomplishments themselves, but maybe immodesty is out of order because accomplishments are not really ours in a sense. Perhaps we fool ourselves about our responsibility and identify attributes as special so that we can exalt ourselves by dealing out false credit and setting up various categories that lift up some by keeping others out.

True enough, pride can be oddly based, and public honour and adulation can often be dealt out in ways that make it difficult to escape the conclusion that particular evaluations are driven by the desire to perpetuate power and privilege. But I see no reason to eliminate honour and its close conceptual cousins except as they relate to the concept of credit. I think that skepticism about credit surely bears some truth, but as a fundamental axiom about human agency and desert, any claim that we deserve no credit because the “essential explanatory factors” behind our accomplishments are outside of our control seems wildly exaggerated. Nevertheless, even if I am wrong about credit, we should not reduce the evaluation of people to a matter of sheer desert. We can make perfect sense of judgements about people for good and ill independent of the issue of responsibility. It makes sense to highlight all sorts of good and beautiful things about human beings, things that should rightly inspire pride and admiration, and as such might be given to breeding immodesty, while also leaving aside the issue of whether people deserve credit for these good and beautiful things.

To appreciate these points better, imagine someone guilty of the most egregious sins of immodesty. Imagine someone who boasts and brags all the time. And imagine telling this person that his desire and disposition to think so highly of himself was “illegitimate” because his gifts and achievements were the results of a random genetic lottery. I could well imagine such a person replying by laughing away the charge. Conceivably, this person might be addicted to recognition from others and himself, but the craved recognition might have nothing to do with credit and desert. Schueler is right about a desire for recognition being at the core of modesty and immodesty, but his account goes awry by treating the desire

for recognition too simply. An interest in recognition is not only compatible with modesty, but an absolute disinterest in recognition and honours could constitute a genuine character flaw in some contexts.

Obviously, saying what is wrong about these four conceptions is not the same thing as saying what modesty really is or why it is a virtue. Essentially, modesty has to do with the conception and presentation of the self, both as one conceives of oneself and as one presents oneself to others. Just as a virtue like courage has self-regarding and other-regarding elements, so too modesty is connected both to our practical agency and to our capacity for meaningful social interaction and communion. Courage involves the capacity to face and silence fears in the service of worthwhile ends. Without courage, we may be slaves to our own fears, and when these fears keep us from living up to our commitments to others, they undermine our social attachments. Similarly, modesty protects our practical agency by allowing us to give proper attention to a life of activity by preventing self-absorption, while also protecting our capacity to sustain significant social ties. Modest people moderate and sometimes silence the powerful desire to dwell privately or publicly on their own excellence, unless there should be some good reason to do so (just as courageous people can have very good reasons to run away). And just as courageous people must be aware of the fact that they can be harmed and that some things are rightly feared, modest people must be aware of their actual gifts and accomplishments, but must realize that there are good reasons to supervise the way and degree to which their own gifts and accomplishments figure in the conception and presentation of their very self.

We might say that modest people "*just do it*" in a crucial sense. They concentrate for the most part on a life of genuine activity rather than wallow in their own grandeur. To appreciate what this means, consider the self-regarding element of modesty. As practical agents, we all pursue projects and commitments in life that manifest our attachments and choices. Some things we pursue for the sake of something else, but any successful life is marked by final ends of one sort or another, things that we pursue for their own sake and not just to get something else. Balancing and integrating final and subordinate ends is tricky business. One thing we can say about this picture is that many ends are best viewed in

terms of *activity*. The struggle to be a good son, daughter, sibling, lover, spouse, friend, colleague, neighbour, citizen, philosopher, artist, athlete, actor, soldier, priest, or president is best seen in terms of a life of excellent activity that calls for certain traits and qualities. Of course, not all our ends and desires are best fleshed out in terms of activity. Desires for things like robust health, comfort, leisure, beauty, food, and physical objects are not automatically explained in terms of activity, even if they are certainly related to activities. Yet, most lives are characterized by intrinsic interests in activities, and lives exhausted by passive satisfactions suffer for this fact.

Unlike other creatures who pursue activities of various sorts, human beings also enjoy some degree of self-awareness. And we not only see and understand ourselves as ends-directed beings, but we can also take satisfaction in our own fidelity and success. We have self-conceptions that not only manifest accurate descriptions of the sort of people we are, but also testify to our aspirations about what sort of people we wish to be. Thus, as we pursue the commitments that shape and define our lives, we also construct, maintain, and take satisfaction in these self-conceptions. This capacity for self-awareness is absolutely vital for regulative oversight of one's life and character; we must know what we are in order to know whether we are what we should be. However, the intrinsic good of this capacity for self-awareness should not be overlooked. Those who live true to their ideals and commitments, exercising their powers in an excellent fashion, can experience profound satisfaction from the knowledge and contemplation of the same.

But this capacity for self-awareness is also fraught with dangers. If we are not vigilant, we can succumb to the temptation to wallow in self-absorption. Not every form of self-absorption is identical. Woody Allen is famous for portraying self-absorbed film characters, people who obsess about the details of their lives. Immodest people also succumb to self-absorption, but in their case, the self-absorption is fleshed out in terms of an idolatrous fascination with the self. In many cases, avoiding the inclination to dwell on one's own gifts and accomplishments is no great accomplishment, even though it is always a good thing as a general disposition. Truthfully, those who are not very gifted or accomplished have little reason to dwell on themselves, so such people are like those who conquer fears that ought not to constitute powerful adversar-

ies. Modest people must have something to be proud about, and their accomplishment comes from being able to enjoy full awareness of their worth and merits, complete with all the satisfaction this entails, but without becoming addicted to their own image. Modest people tend to put aside self-referential thoughts about their own grandness in favour of a thorough immersion in the projects and commitments that structure their lives. Modest people aren't ignorant of their worth. Those who simply do not know their own worth might well succumb to immodesty if they only knew more. Neither do modest people devalue their worth by way of some deflating big picture. The recognition of absolute or divine standards of perfection takes nothing away from genuine human accomplishments. And as we shall see shortly, modest people can and should have some concern for honour and recognition. The bottom line with modesty is not that modest people somehow think less of their worth and merits; *they just think less often about them and in ways not given to self-infatuation.*

By avoiding immodesty's self-absorption, modest people avoid a subtle deformation of life and character. The more we dwell on thoughts about our own gifts and accomplishments, the more we run the risk of losing sight of the importance of immersing ourselves in a life of activity pursued for its intrinsic values. Pride and self-satisfaction, rather than being a happy result of such immersion, can easily become our primary goal, and this kind of preoccupation can threaten our commitments and attachments in a fundamental way. If my life revolves around being a good husband, father, friend, and philosopher, then I should take rightful satisfaction from any success and fidelity. But the moment I begin to be more concerned with thinking of myself as a splendid husband, father, friend, or philosopher, rather than actually being all these things, I risk being cut adrift from the moorings of my life.

Notice that very accomplished, gifted people face a greater uphill battle than the more modestly accomplished and gifted so far as fending off the inclination to bask in glory is concerned. Surrounded by others who may shower them with praise and adulation, and aware of their excellence even if others do not regularly highlight it, these people must exercise careful vigilance to avoid succumbing to the temptation to dwell on themselves. This is nothing more than the flipside of the less fortunate hurdle that some people face. Those who are thoroughly ignored, maligned, oppressed,

or abandoned as less worthy or unworthy creatures must struggle to sustain a sense of their own worth in the face of such onslaughts.

In most cases, modest people are likely to employ psychological defence mechanisms to fend off becoming full of themselves. Modest people are likely not to spend much of their time thinking, much less waxing poetic about themselves; they are too busy being good and doing well to sit around thinking of how great they are. Likewise, they most often try to keep others from singing their praises, in part because they don't need to be told how wonderful they are and so they find such talk tiresome. Functionally, these attitudes and behaviours may closely mimic ignorance. Because thoughts about one's own worth are ordinarily far from view in a modest person's life, such thoughts may seem to be literally absent. But again, modest people know their worth; they just don't revel in dwelling on it. In this same vein, modest people may sometimes be given to other sorts of thoughts that surely can help fend off immodesty's self-infatuation: There is always room for improvement; there are many things at which I don't excel; I have been blessed with natural gifts and fortunate circumstances, and others are not so blessed; no matter how good I am at this or that, others count just as much as me; at the end of the day, we are all just fragile little creatures trying to do our best on this tiny planet in this vast universe. These are precisely the kinds of thoughts that the views of modesty discussed above would predict. The problem with these views is that they take such thoughts and attitudes as *essential* to modesty, instead of seeing them as natural, helpful defence mechanisms.

Like any virtue, modesty is a matter of degrees and its possession and exercise can run along various lines. People of great, average, or meagre gifts and accomplishments can be disinclined to dwell on themselves to various degrees. Only with the former can we be certain that success and adulation can't change them in this respect. And people who are modest in some ways may not be in others. Full possession of the virtue suffuses character in such a way as to fight off immodesty and provide for just the right amount of contemplation about one's worth and merits in all facets of one's life. Modest people dwell on themselves at the right times, to the right degree, for the right reasons, and derive the right kind of satisfaction from this self-knowledge and contemplation. Like all virtues, modesty requires a subtle appreciation of context.

Were this all that modesty had going for it, this would be enough to recommend it as a virtue. But modesty has an important social dimension to go along with its self-regarding element, and careful attention to this dimension completes the picture of modesty by attending to how modesty figures in our nature as social beings. Just as courage requires an appreciation of what fears should be faced for the sake of one's own good and the good of others, so too modesty requires an appreciation for how the conception and presentation of the self affects others.

Modest people are sensitive to the way that their gifts and accomplishments might conceivably occasion pain, disappointment, and humiliation. When faced with people who are obviously more accomplished and gifted, those less so can suffer acutely for the comparison. Of course, there are all sorts of reasons why the sight of even the most gifted and accomplished might not bother some people a bit. But even those who are not given to suffering for comparisons with the gifted and accomplished, much less envying or begrudging them, may feel otherwise when faced by those who flaunt their superiority. Immodest people who rub in their assets by word, deed, or attitude are prone to infuriate because their self-infatuation and insensitive celebration of self so often comes at the expense of others. Whether or not immodest words, gestures, or attitudes are meant in this way, they feel disrespectful to inferiors who must endure the behavioural manifestations of immodesty's self-absorption. When immodest people crow about themselves in the presence of less gifted and accomplished people, the experience feels like a case of being shown up; it can be hard to avoid getting the sense that the immodest person's claim to be so great carries with it the clear implication that others are not so great.

Modest people avoid flaunting themselves in hurtful ways, but their sensitivity goes well beyond avoiding immodesty. By downplaying and minimizing attention to their gifts and accomplishments in the appropriate circumstances, modest people create a more congenial atmosphere for the appreciation of these same gifts and accomplishments, one less charged with competition and hurtful comparisons. The modest person's exercise of her powers can be acknowledged in ways that invite communal appreciation and enjoyment of these gifts and powers as ours, rather than mine instead of yours. Because modest people do not exude proprietary claims about *their* powers, *their* gifts, *their* accomplishments, where

the heavy emphasis is on the relevant personal pronoun, others are more likely to enjoy these powers, gifts, and accomplishments as expressions of human excellence, more along the lines of the way that we can admire and participate in the excellence of loved ones, ancestors, and distant luminaries.

Notice that all this depends heavily on circumstance and context. There may be times in the life of any modest person when she must claim the honour and recognition due her, where failing to do so would even be a moral failure. Consider the great Negro League ballplayers. Titans like Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige sought recognition and honour as the equals of their white counterparts in the Major Leagues. Downplaying or minimizing their talents would certainly have helped perpetuate injustice. When they showcased their talents and sang their own praises, they struck a blow for the recognition they deserved, individually and as a people.

Moreover, consider the natural reactions of those Negro League greats who were fortunate to see the day when Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier and made good with the Dodgers, but for whom opportunity came too late or never came at all. These men surely savoured the fact that one of their brothers did them all proud. But no doubt the experience was bittersweet. While Jackie Robinson and his successors eventually got the recognition they deserved, those left behind missed out on such recognition by virtue of nothing more than happenstance. Surely a desire to have one's talents duly recognized and honoured was hardly immodest, but it was also fully compatible with modesty too. Even if those who excel in relative obscurity have the comfort of their own knowledge, there must be some natural sting to seeing inferiors lifted on high. To crave extravagant and ostentatious public recognition and honour is one thing. But to desire one's rightful place at the table is quite another. Modest people do not dwell excessively on themselves, and neither have they any desire that others should dwell on them so. But just as rightful pride should be fully compatible with modesty if we are to see modesty as a virtue, so too an interest in being given one's due is perfectly appropriate and perfectly consistent with modesty. Knowing one's excellence and knowing that at least some others know it too is often enough for modest people. Secure in their gifts and accomplishments, they do not need to remind themselves ceaselessly. But in the appropriate cir-

cumstances, there is nothing amiss about modest people calling attention to themselves.

Under certain circumstances, modest people can feel compelled to flaunt their excellence. Imagine a modest piano master who overhears an immodest student belittle the talents of his fellow students. Under the circumstances, the best thing that a master might do would be to put this fellow in his place. It might behoove the master to showcase her talents and lay this fellow low. Rubbing in her superiority might be the best way to drive home the fact that others are better and that those who are excellent shouldn't need to be excellent at the expense of others.

Likewise, there are certain contexts that invite playful flaunting of various sorts, and where the invitation is not automatically issued at the expense of modesty. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora Neale Hurston talks about growing up in Eatonville, Florida, and about how the entire community prized the public sessions around Joe Clarke's grocery store porch where participants traded brash claims and tales of strength, cleverness, wit, and wisdom. In many respects, these sessions functioned like the tragedies in ancient Greece. They gave voice to communal aspirations, hopes, and fears, though unlike the tragedies, they did so in playful ways. Though nominally a competition, the real interest was in an excellent play of the game, and playing the game meant singing one's own praises, inevitably lying and grossly exaggerating as the stakes were raised. The worst losers in such contests were those who took the game to heart and got mad or truly insulted. The winners were those who could sing their own exaggerated praises to the hilt. A modest person could surely play this game *as a game*, so long as the game did not carry over into self-absorption in the rest of life. Hurston and her people would have seen an inflexible refusal to play in this fashion as the mark of an uptight, unduly constrained soul.

Notice how practical judgement enters into this picture of modesty in a way unlike the conceptions of modesty considered above. Modest people have well-developed dispositions to avoid drawing special, excessive attention to themselves. But they must confront particular situations in life and figure out the appropriate way in which the self should be presented. The circumstances might call for an extra special measure of care around those who might be particularly vulnerable. But in other circumstances, good

judgement may dictate drawing attention to oneself if there are good reasons to do so. Following through on such a judgement may run against the everyday grain of a modest person's inclinations, but this is no different than the circumstances for a courageous person used to standing firm in the face of fears, but who realizes that there are good reasons to flee so she or others might live to fight another day.

Note how this same kind of judgement operates with respect to the self-regarding elements of modesty considered above. Again, modest people are disinclined to dwell on themselves. But circumstances will dictate and practical wisdom must adjudicate just how much to dwell on oneself. Even the very gifted and accomplished are bound to experience low points where taking some refuge in the satisfaction of one's gifts and accomplishments is desirable. Treading this fine balance between just right and not enough or too much is never an easy feat. But modesty suits us to the task because it is an active element of human agency that involves fine perception and insightful judgment. In a sense, modest people may "*just do it*," but they just do it in just the right way. They may make just doing it look easy and entirely natural, but this is no different than other virtues. The fact that virtuous people exercise their virtues with an ease and grace should not tempt us to lose sight of their achievement. Moreover, we should not expect modesty to stand out in everyday contexts, any more than we expect courage to make its presence felt against the backdrop of everyday life. Caricatures of modesty that depict modest people as obsessively disinclined to acknowledge their own worth are likely to make them stick out precisely because their behaviour can always be predicted without fail: modest people never sing their own praises; they always avoid praise and honour; they never seek credit; they always keep a low profile; they *always* downplay their gifts and achievements; they never see themselves as better in any way that truly counts. A more sophisticated conception of modesty resists this simple picture and acknowledges the subtler attitudes, habits, attachments, and commitments at work in modesty.

I believe that this conception of modesty rings true to modesty as we experience and know it. Most importantly, this understanding gets at what we see as worthwhile and praiseworthy about modesty. If I am wrong about this, then I say so much the worse for modesty. In this case, we should scrap modesty as a virtue,

make up a name for what I have been describing here, and herald it rather than modesty. However, I think there is no need to take this step. Were I to re-emphasize anything as the distinct advantage of the account of modesty provided here, I would emphasize the compatibility of pride and modesty. For some people, the very mention of pride conjures up notions of *excessive* pride. But if we consider pride's essence, we see that it is nothing more than the sense of worth and merit that fittingly accompanies the recognition of excellence. We should not succumb to the tempting equivocation that paints pride along the lines of conceit, arrogance, vanity, or puffed-up self-absorption. The slide from pride as a rightful response to the worth of one's attributes and accomplishments to these sins and vices is analogous to painting mature romantic love as nothing more than something along the lines of an obsessive teenage infatuation. Gifted and accomplished people can be proud without dwelling on themselves in an idolatrous fashion, just as mature lovers can possess a deep and abiding love for each other without spending every waking moment in the grip of compulsive desire. We must be careful to make the subtle distinctions between good and beautiful elements of character and those character twists and deformations that we do best to minimize and avoid.

Some people may be inflexibly committed to the proposition that humans are inherently corrupt, sinful, or pathetic beings, and thus, pride is always misplaced at best. Undeniably, human beings can be all these things. But history and everyday experience also tells us that we can embody and accomplish many good and beautiful things, things that ought to inspire rightful pride. There is no more benign attitude than appropriate pride with respect to the self. Whatever the dangers of excessive pride, human beings live richer and better lives for having the aspiration to do themselves and others proud. Ultimately, categorical suspicions about pride, along with outright rejection of pride as an important element of a well-lived life, are pathological.

The fact is that modesty is a complex virtue that calls for complex regulation of how we see and present ourselves. Again, the fine balance of dwelling just enough on oneself without falling to the side of too much or not enough is both delicate and difficult, calling into play fine judgement and perception. The way to handle legitimate worries about falling on the side of too much is not to tether us to the side of too little with a skewed conception of

modesty that fails to do justice to what is good and best about us. When modesty is properly appreciated, we see the trait as an essential virtue, one that is at the heart of our agency as self-aware social beings with a deep interest in being good, doing well, and also knowing it as we share our fate with others.