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## MODESTY AS KINDNESS

*Alan T. Wilson*

### *Abstract*

The trait of modesty has received significant philosophical attention in recent years. This is due, in part, to Julia Driver's claim that modesty is able to act as a counter-example to intellectualist accounts of the nature of virtue. In this paper I engage with the debate about the nature of modesty by proposing a new account. 'Modesty as kindness' states that the trait of modesty ought to be considered as intimately connected with the more fundamental virtue of kindness. I set out the account, explain its benefits and defend it against possible objections. I then ask whether or not the intense focus on the trait of modesty has actually furthered our understanding of the nature of virtue more generally, and suggest that alternative approaches ought to be considered.

### **Introduction**

The level of philosophical attention lavished upon the trait of modesty over the past twenty or so years is nothing short of remarkable. The effort that has gone in to providing an account of this trait and an explanation for its status as a virtue must surely make modesty one of the most discussed traits in the recent virtue literature. Originally, the focus on modesty had a more fundamental aim. Julia Driver has argued that modesty can be used as a counter-example in order to cast doubt upon intellectualist accounts of the virtues – accounts which view virtue as necessarily involving some form of intellectual excellence such as relevant special knowledge or understanding. However, as the debate has intensified, the attempt to explain the nature of modesty has also proven to be of independent interest. In this paper, my main aim is to engage with this debate by providing a convincing account of modesty. This account views modesty as being intimately connected with the fundamental virtue of kindness, and I will argue that it is able to provide those benefits which are required of any successful account. Following this, I will briefly ask whether or not the intense focus on modesty has been useful in advancing the

more fundamental debate about the nature of virtue. I will suggest that we would do well to consider other approaches to this issue – including attempting to understand a wider range of different specific virtues.

### 1. Driver's Underestimation Account

The current debate regarding the nature of modesty was prompted by an account of that trait defended by Julia Driver in several papers and in her book *Uneasy Virtue*.<sup>1</sup> Driver's aim was to use modesty as the prime example of a 'virtue of ignorance' – a virtue which requires ignorance and so which tells against intellectualist accounts of the virtues.<sup>2</sup> According to Driver, modesty consists in an agent being ignorant of their own true level of worth (or ability or accomplishment). The modest agent is one who systematically underestimates these things, and who would continue to do so in the face of evidence to the contrary. Driver sums up her account, and the implications for theories of virtue, in the following way:

What the analysis comes down to is this: for a person to be modest, she must be ignorant with regard to her self-worth. She must think herself less deserving, or less worthy, than she actually is . . . Since modesty is generally considered to be a virtue, it would seem that this virtue rests upon an epistemic defect.<sup>3</sup>

This underestimation account has acted as a catalyst for debate about the nature and virtue-status of the trait of modesty. In defence of this controversial account, Driver claims that it provides three benefits which should be required of any successful approach. Firstly, the underestimation account explains why we would find it strange to hear someone proclaim "I am modest". Driver states that we would find this strange because being modest involves being ignorant of your self-worth, and so the truly modest agent would not be self-aware enough to utter the phrase. The

<sup>1</sup> Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also, Driver 'The Virtues of Ignorance', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 86, No. 7, (July 1989) pp. 373–384 and Driver 'Modesty and Ignorance', *Ethics*, Vol. 109, No. 4, (July 1999) pp. 827–834.

<sup>2</sup> Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

truth of the phrase is incompatible with the agent actually believing it.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the underestimation account makes it easy to understand what false modesty consists of and why we might find it an undesirable trait. To be falsely modest, on this account, would be to have an accurate or even inflated view of your own achievements while giving the impression that you underestimate them. If the agent's deception is discovered then others will feel 'patronized' or 'condescended to' and so false modesty will have a negative social impact.<sup>5</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Driver claims that the underestimation account is able to explain why we value modesty. The ignorance of the modest agent suggests that they are less concerned with comparing themselves to others and such a person 'seems less likely to provoke an envious response in others'.<sup>6</sup> Driver's underestimation account therefore appears to allow us to do three things: (i) explain the strangeness of the phrase "I am modest", (ii) provide a plausible corresponding account of false modesty and (iii) explain why modesty is a valuable trait. For this reason, it cannot be immediately dismissed. Any rival account will gain plausibility by also providing these three benefits.

Despite these supposed benefits, there is good reason to reject the underestimation account of modesty. The two main problems facing Driver's view are that (1) the explanation given for the value of modesty is inadequate, and (2) the conditions suggested for modesty are not sufficient. Regarding the first of these two problems, Driver has claimed that, on her view, modesty would help to reduce cases of envy and that this is why we regard it as a valuable trait. However, there is reason to think that this cannot be why we value modesty. In addition to worrying that systematic underestimation of self might be more likely to *increase* cases of envy, it is also unclear that reducing the likelihood of envy is enough to make a character trait valuable.<sup>7</sup> There are other traits which look like they could reduce cases of envy while not being considered valuable. I believe the most obvious of these would be successful cases of false modesty. If an agent is particularly good at convincing others that they are a modest and unassuming

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Statman argues convincingly that underestimation would be more likely to increase cases of envy in 'Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No.169, (Oct. 1992) pp. 420–438, at p. 424.

individual then it seems that there will be no difference in effect between false modesty and genuine modesty. And yet, we do not value successful instances of false modesty. G. F. Schueler has suggested other traits or attributes which can make a similar point. Those with a dull wit or mediocre sporting ability are less likely to generate envy as a result of these traits and yet this is not enough for those traits to be considered valuable.<sup>8</sup> The point here is clear – even if Driver is correct to say that modesty reduces cases of envy in society, this cannot be enough to fully explain why we value the trait. The explanation of why we value modesty is inadequate.

The second and perhaps more damaging problem facing Driver is that the conditions suggested for modesty are not sufficient. It is possible to meet the requirements of the underestimation account while not possessing the trait of modesty. Schueler provides an example of someone who believes that they are the second greatest scientist of the century while in fact being the greatest.<sup>9</sup> Such an individual could still be incredibly boastful about what they think is their level of achievement, perhaps cruelly ridiculing colleagues for their relative lack of ability and demanding that others show them respect in various humiliating and distasteful ways. As long as such an agent continues to underestimate their true level of achievement (and would do so in the face of some contrary evidence) then they meet Driver's conditions for being modest. And yet, it does not seem right that the boastful scientist should be considered a modest agent. The underestimation account is not sufficient.

It is important that we correctly diagnose the failing in Driver's account which allows for the boastful scientist counter-example. And the correct diagnosis can be achieved by noting that rival accounts will be subject to similar counter-examples so long as they focus entirely on features internal to the agent. If modesty is solely a matter of how an agent rates their own abilities or of how they compare themselves to others, variants of the boastful scientist case will be possible. This is true for various rival accounts, including those which demand that the agent not over-estimate their worth, those which demand that the agent acknowledge the equal moral worth of all humans, and those which demand that the agent compare themselves against the standard of idealised

<sup>8</sup> G. F. Schueler, 'Why Modesty is a Virtue', *Ethics*, Vol. 107, No. 3, (Apr. 1997) pp. 467–485, at p. 469.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 470.

agents.<sup>10</sup> In each case, it will be possible for the agent to be both proud and obnoxiously boastful about some ability that they do possess. Perhaps, then, we would do better in avoiding the problems that afflict the underestimation account by tackling this issue in a direct way. What is needed is an external requirement – a restriction on how the truly modest agent will behave in their interactions with other people.<sup>11</sup> If our account of modesty stipulates that the modest agent be disposed not to brag or boast or ridicule others for their relative lack of ability, then we can be confident in ruling out problems analogous to the boastful scientist objection. However, this stipulation alone will not be enough. We can easily imagine a case where this disposition is present but where we do not believe the agent to be truly modest – for example, in cases where the agent’s intention is to trick others or to gain the benefits of a good reputation. Such a case would appear closer to false modesty than genuine modesty. The solution to this problem, therefore, is to provide a behavioural restriction which also successfully excludes cases of false modesty. I will now propose an account which provides such a restriction while also providing the three benefits listed above.

## 2. Modesty as Kindness

We now have four requirements that must be met by any successful account. When presenting her own account, Driver highlighted three benefits which it would be desirable to provide – (i) an explanation of the strangeness of the phrase “I am modest”, (ii) a plausible corresponding account of false modesty and (iii) an explanation of why genuine modesty is a valuable trait. We can add a further requirement to this list – (iv) the account should include a behavioural component in order to avoid the boastful-scientist-type objections which are problematic for other accounts. I will now propose an account of modesty which is able to satisfy all of these requirements.

<sup>10</sup> I have in mind here the theories proposed by Owen Flanagan, ‘Virtue and Ignorance’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 87, No. 8, (Aug. 1990) pp. 420–428, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, ‘The Virtue of Modesty’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (July 1993) pp. 235–246, and Jason Brennan, ‘Modesty without Illusion’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 75 No.1, (July 2007) pp. 111–128 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Ridge argues for the necessity of such a requirement in ‘Modesty as a Virtue’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3, (July 2000) pp. 269–283, at pp. 271–272. A basic dispositional approach is also mentioned (and rejected) in Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, Ch.2.

My suggestion is that the trait of modesty ought to be considered as closely related to the more fundamental virtue of kindness. It is at least part of the nature of kindness that the kind agent will be concerned to protect and promote the well-being of others. The modest agent is one who shares this concern and who is influenced by it in the way that they present themselves. The 'modesty as kindness' account (MK) can be set out in the following way:

To be modest is to be disposed to present your accomplishments/positive attributes in a way that is sensitive to the potential negative impact on the well-being of others, where this disposition stems from a concern for that well-being.

This account is able to satisfy the four conditions that were set out above. The account can (i) explain why there would usually be something strange about the phrase "I am modest". Given that modesty is taken to be a positive trait, the agent who utters the phrase would be providing evidence that they lack a disposition that is a key part of genuine modesty. However, MK does show us that the phrase is not *necessarily* incompatible with genuine modesty, as Driver appears to have thought. If the agent in question does not consider modesty to be a valuable trait, or if they believe themselves to be in a situation where no-one's well-being would be negatively affected (for example, in a job interview or among close friends) then the statement could perfectly well be compatible with genuine modesty. This seems to me to be the correct result. And MK also appears to get things right with regards to (ii) giving an account of false modesty. To possess (the persistent trait of) false modesty is to possess the same disposition regarding how you present your accomplishments/attributes but where this disposition stems from the wrong kind of motivation. Examples would include the desire for personal gain (for example, downplaying some positive attribute in order to ingratiate yourself with your boss, or to encourage the general public to like you so that they buy your autobiography).

Perhaps the most important benefit of MK is that it (iii) allows us to fully explain why modesty is a valuable trait. First of all, the account suggests that modesty will have the very same social benefits that Driver claimed were predicted by the underestimation account. The modest agent avoids bragging and boasting about their achievements out of a concern for the negative effect on

those who would do badly by comparison. One side-effect will be that the modest agent is unlikely to provoke envy and dislike in others and so will have the ameliorating social impact that was described by Driver. In addition to this, we can now also see that the possession of modesty is indicative of a kind and caring nature on the part of the modest agent. The modest agent is concerned to protect and promote the well-being of others through their self-presentation, and so will be likely to also possess the virtue of kindness. Indeed, I believe that modesty can be considered as simply an expression or manifestation of the more fundamental virtue of kindness. Such a view of modesty as a restricted form of kindness makes it clear why modesty is a morally valuable trait, and explains the intuition that modesty be included on a list of the moral virtues. But even a more conservative view (on which modesty is merely good evidence for the separate virtue of kindness) will be able to explain that intuition. Either way, the modesty as kindness account is able to adequately explain the value of modesty.

The three benefits that were demanded by Driver have been provided by the modesty as kindness account. Furthermore, by focusing on how the modest agent presents themselves to others, MK is able to (iv) avoid the boastful-scientist-type examples which are problematic for purely internalist accounts. And this feature also allows MK to provide one further benefit. One interesting use to which the term “modest” has sometimes been put is as a description of someone who dresses conservatively and in a way which seeks to conceal their body from others. This usage can be explained by MK. Modesty is a matter of being sensitive in your self-presentation out of a concern for the well-being of others. And there is more than one way in which the failure to be “modest” in one’s dress may have been thought likely to negatively affect the well-being of others. Most obviously, the failure to dress “modestly” might generate feelings of either disgust or of inadequacy in others. In addition to this, in societies where sexual thoughts are judged sinful, the failure to be “modest” in one’s appearance may be considered damaging for encouraging others into sin. Indeed, the fact that this usage of the term has become less frequent may be connected to a reduction in such understandings of sin. MK gains credibility by being able to explain this usage, in addition to being able to provide the other benefits that have been listed. I now want to respond to some possible objections to MK, before moving on



to consider the implications for a general theory of the nature of virtue.

### 3. Possible Objections to Modesty as Kindness

#### *Objection 1 – High Opinion*

A first response which might be prompted by the modesty as kindness account is that it allows for the modest agent to have a high opinion of themselves. As long as an agent is disposed to present themselves in a way that is sensitive to the possible negative impact on the well-being of others, and as long as this disposition stems from a concern for that well-being, then the agent can think very highly of their own accomplishments or attributes and still be classed as modest. Consider a variation on the boastful scientist. A proud scientist may share with the boastful scientist the belief that their work is really very impressive indeed. But as long as they are motivated to downplay how they present their impressiveness whenever doing so would harm the well-being of others, the proud (but kind) scientist can be counted as modest. Do we really think that having such a high opinion of yourself is consistent with genuine modesty? I believe that it is, and that this is a matter of wide consensus within the literature on modesty. For example, Driver's underestimation account allows for a modest agent to have an extremely high opinion of their own worth as long as their assessment is slightly less positive than is actually deserved.<sup>12</sup> And this is also a feature shared by a large number of the accounts put forward by rivals of Driver.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this is enough to show that it is not widely considered to be the case that having a high opinion of yourself is a barrier to possessing modesty. Some people do have genuinely impressive attributes or accomplishments, and awareness of this should not automatically render the agent immodest. The scientist who uncovers a cure for

<sup>12</sup> See Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Flanagan's non-overestimation account allows an agent to think very highly of themselves so long as they do not overestimate their own value – high but accurate self-evaluation is perfectly fine (see 'Virtue and Ignorance' pp. 424–425). Ben Ze'ev asks for the agent to view their fundamental human worth as similar to that of other people – but this is consistent with viewing your human worth very highly, as well as with viewing your specific accomplishments and attributes very highly (see 'The Virtue of Modesty' p. 237). And Ridge's account in 'Modesty as a Virtue' makes no demands regarding the agent's self-evaluation.

some significant illness does not lose the potential for modesty upon realising the greatness of their accomplishment. Roger Federer could perfectly well be modest despite correctly believing that he is more talented than almost anyone else who has ever played tennis. In short, an agent can recognise their own high level of accomplishment while still being genuinely modest. MK is no worse off in allowing for this possibility.

### *Objection 2 – Inaccurate Opinion*

When responding to the first objection, I appealed to other accounts of modesty in order to show that MK is in line with the common consensus. In doing so, there was one important difference between MK and some of the other accounts that was obscured. MK allows for the modest agent to have a high opinion of themselves that is not an accurate reflection of their true level of accomplishment or ability. That is, not only can the modest agent evaluate themselves highly, the modest agent can even *over*-estimate their own level of ability. There is no requirement within MK that a modest agent's self-evaluation be accurate. And this may appear to be a more worrying problem for my proposed account. There will be many (in the literature and beyond) who do not believe that a genuinely modest agent can go around overestimating themselves. To make matters worse, it is possible to generate a rival account which avoids this conclusion. All that would be required is to amend MK by adding a requirement that the modest agent have an accurate understanding of their attributes or accomplishments.<sup>14</sup> Call the amended version of modesty as kindness which requires accurate self-assessment 'intellectualised modesty as kindness' (IMK). It seems clear that this approach will retain many of the benefits that I have claimed are provided by MK. Intellectualised modesty as kindness therefore looks like a strong contender. And if we have the intuition that overestimation of self is incompatible with genuine modesty then we will have every reason to accept IMK and to reject my proposed account. The challenge, then, is to show that genuine

<sup>14</sup> Such an account would be similar to one that has recently been proposed by Irene McMullin (although on her account the accurate self-evaluation appears to play a more primary role by actually generating the agent's desire to avoid harm to others). See McMullin, 'A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuousness of Modesty', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 241, (October 2010) pp. 783–807.

modesty is indeed compatible with overestimation and that, therefore, the amendment to MK is not necessary.

In order to meet this challenge, I want to consider two different types of case. First of all (and as with so many other issues), things can be made clearer by imagining a brain-in-a-vat. Such a being will receive all of the same kinds of experience as a normal person, but these experiences will be artificially created for them by scientists. In reality they are just a brain floating in a vat. In such a case, a great many of the beliefs held by the brain will be inaccurate. For example, the brain-in-a-vat may believe themselves to be an exceptionally skilled break-dancer, and their evidence may seem to back-up this self-assessment. But the truth of the matter, of course, is that the brain-in-a-vat is not able to break-dance – they are significantly overestimating their own abilities.<sup>15</sup> And yet, it does not seem to be true to say that the brain-in-a-vat is incapable of modesty. It would be overly harsh (as well as incorrect) to inform the brain that not only can it not break-dance, but it could never have been modest about it either. As long as the brain is disposed to present their break-dancing ability in a way that is sensitive to the well-being of others, and the brain is motivated out of a concern for that well-being, then we have every reason to say that the brain is being genuinely modest about what it takes to be its ability to break-dance. Indeed, if it was revealed that we are all in fact brains-in-vats, this fact alone should not lead us to question the modesty of any of those people who were previously accepted as possessing that trait. If this case is convincing (and we believe that the brain could indeed be modest) then we ought to deny the claim that genuine modesty is incompatible with the overestimation of self. The proposed amendment should then be rejected and we ought to prefer MK to IMK.

The second type of case that I want to consider is one where the inaccuracy in the agent's beliefs is much less widespread. Instead we can consider a case where a simple miscalculation or misremembering leads an agent to overestimate their accomplishments. Imagine a restaurateur who believes herself to have

<sup>15</sup> This example would need to become significantly more complicated if we accept David Chalmers' view that there is a sense in which some envatted beings could truly possess such abilities, as well as possessing positive attributes such as lovely eyes or an impressive physique. It would take us too far from the central thread of this paper to discuss these possible metaphysical complications. See Chalmers, 'The Matrix as Metaphysics' in Susan Schneider (ed.) *Science Fiction and Philosophy*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009).

played a major role in catering for a party of five hundred people and who is proud of having accomplished this feat. The restaurateur, however, is careful in how and when she advertises her accomplishment. She listens politely when others tell of having catered for three hundred people and does not feel the need to belittle that (lesser) achievement. When colleagues complain of having to deal with (a mere) two hundred customers she holds her tongue and refrains from phrases such as “You think two hundred is bad? I once catered for a party of five hundred!” And when she is pressed for details of the event, she is sure to acknowledge the contribution of others who were working on that fateful day. In short, the restaurateur is disposed to be sensitive to the well-being of others in how she presents her accomplishment, and is motivated by that well-being. The restaurateur is a paragon of modesty. And we should not change our assessment of her even if we find out that she has misremembered and the actual number of customers served was four hundred and fifty, or even four hundred. Her modesty lies in how she was disposed to act based on what she took her level of accomplishment to be, rather than in her accuracy when assessing that accomplishment. An agent can perfectly well be modest about what they take their level of accomplishment or ability to be, even if the true level is somewhat lower. The proposed account of modesty as kindness is no worse off in allowing for this possibility. Therefore, we ought to reject the proposed amendment to MK and resist the move to IMK.

The above cases have hopefully shown that it is possible to possess genuine modesty despite having an inflated view of your own accomplishments or attributes. However, perhaps this is not enough. Even if we now accept that there are *some* cases where overestimation is compatible with genuine modesty, isn't there still something suspicious about other cases? What about the philosopher who always assumes that their own theories are superior, but who is nevertheless disposed to act in ways that conceal this? Can this agent be considered truly modest? In order to answer this question, more detail is required. First of all, we need to clarify the agent's motivation for concealing their belief that their own theories are generally superior to others. If the disposition stems from a desire to be well-regarded or to gain a promotion then MK can agree that this agent lacks modesty – they are being falsely modest. Genuine modesty requires that the agent be motivated by a concern for the well-being of others. Secondly, we need to

confirm whether or not the agent is correct to think that their theories are generally superior. If so then we will have a case of high but accurate opinion and MK (as well as many other theories) will rightly tell us that the agent can indeed be modest. Thirdly, we ought to ask whether or not the agent has strong evidence for their belief, even if it is inaccurate. If so, then we will have a case similar to the two that were detailed above and I have already argued that we have good reason to accept those as cases of genuine modesty. Therefore, in order for this kind of case to be different from those previously discussed, it must have three features: the agent must be motivated by a concern for the well-being of others, the agent must be over-estimating the general superiority of their theories, and the agent must have less-than-convincing evidence for their belief in this superiority. With these features in place, we need to ask whether or not MK would class this agent as genuinely modest, and whether or not that verdict is acceptable.

It seems clear that MK is bound to classify the agent in this case as genuinely modest. They are disposed to be sensitive to the well-being of others when presenting what they take to be their level of accomplishment, and we have stipulated that they are motivated by a concern for that well-being. How then can we explain the suspicion that the philosopher (who wrongly and without good evidence believes their own theories to be superior) does not deserve to be classed as truly modest? One possibility is that the willingness to believe in one's own superiority without good evidence indicates that the agent is being unkind when they evaluate other people. As an account that views modesty as closely related to kindness (and possibly even as a restricted form of kindness), MK can agree that we are justified in being suspicious about the agent's modesty. Alternatively, it is possible that our suspicion is being caused by some other failing. The agent certainly appears to possess certain epistemic vices that would make us want to criticise their character, and it is possible that we simply misdiagnose their failing as a failing of modesty. Finally, it is possible that more work needs to be done to clarify the precise relationship between the trait of modesty and the trait of humility. It is often assumed that these two traits are one and the same, and this would explain why cases of a lack of humility (like the philosopher in our example) are assumed to be cases of a lack of modesty. If we instead reject the assumption that modesty is identical to humility, then we can accept the verdict of MK that the

philosopher is being modest, while explaining the mistaken intuition to the contrary. As long as at least one of these explanations for our intuition in the case of the overestimating philosopher is plausible (appeal to evidence of a lack of kindness, appeal to an epistemic failing or appeal to a distinction between modesty and humility) then we can happily accept the judgement of MK in such a case. This fact, coupled with the points made above, should lead us to deny that MK faces any serious threat from cases of inaccurate opinion.

### *Objection 3 – Deception*

A final objection that I will consider is that the proposed account attributes genuine modesty in cases where an agent is being purposely deceptive. I have suggested that modesty is compatible with the agent having a false view of their own level of ability (like the brain-in-a-vat), but it might be thought that modesty is incompatible with having an *accurate* view of such abilities. To know very well how impressive you are while sometimes presenting yourself as being less impressive is deceptive. The disposition to do so is therefore an unappealing one – even when motivated by a concern for the well-being of others. And if the disposition being described is unappealing, then it either cannot be the correct account of modesty, or it will have shown us that modesty must not be a virtue.

This objection can also be dismissed. First of all, it is not clear that the modest agent will necessarily have to be deceptive. As Ridge points out, ‘A person may fail to emphasize some fact, say that he is a world-famous philosopher, without making *any* effort to get those around him to reject the proposition corresponding to that fact.’<sup>16</sup> All that might be required is that the agent not go out of their way to draw attention to their accomplishments (or positive attributes) in cases where doing so might have a negative impact on others. And this is not deceptive. Secondly, it is not clear that the disposition to deceive in cases where another’s well-being is at stake is an unappealing one. Perhaps I *should* be disposed to lie or mislead when confronted with a situation where telling the truth will be (unnecessarily) harmful. This simply amounts to being tactful, and we intuitively think that this can be a perfectly nice, and perhaps even admirable, trait to possess. So

<sup>16</sup> Ridge, ‘Modesty as a Virtue’, p. 272 (emphasis in original).

even if modesty on the proposed account could involve deceit, it is not clear that this makes modesty unappealing. And, thirdly, it seems that if we did demand that the modest agent not have an accurate view of their own worth, then this might make it harder to support the idea that modesty is a virtue. A trait which is incompatible with self-knowledge looks to be far more unappealing than one which simply allows for (benevolent) deceit. In terms of allowing for the value of modesty to be explained, we would be better off supporting MK than to demand ignorance from the modest agent.

It seems, therefore, that the modesty as kindness account is able to respond to these possible objections. I believe that this, coupled with the benefits of MK that were highlighted above, makes a strong case for the acceptance of this account. Before concluding, I now want to take some time to consider whether or not the intense focus on the trait of modesty has been useful in the way that was originally hoped.

#### **4. Has Modesty Furthered the Debate About Virtue?**

Let us now re-focus on Driver's original intention when discussing the trait of modesty. While the nature of that trait has proven to be of considerable interest in its own right, the consideration of modesty was originally supposed to perform a more fundamental role. Driver believed that modesty could be used as an example to show that intellectualist accounts of the nature of virtue were incorrect. Virtue cannot always require an intellectual component (of the sort that is suggested by Aristotle's *phronesis*, for example) if there are some virtues that actually consist in the agent being persistently ignorant. If the underestimation account was correct, therefore, this would cast serious doubt on those intellectualist accounts of virtue. However, it has been shown that Driver's underestimation account of modesty is not correct. Given this, is there still anything special about the trait of modesty that will allow it to shed light upon the nature of virtue more generally? Consider again the modesty as kindness account. On this view, it is entirely possible for the modest agent to possess the same seemingly epistemic defects that were mentioned by Driver. It can be the case that the agent lacks self-knowledge due to underestimating (or overestimating) their own accomplishments, they can fail to be sensitive to the evidence that should inform them of



their true worth, and they can fail to correctly understand how their abilities compare to those of other people. While these failings are not *required* by modesty as kindness, they are *consistent* with that account. Given this, MK still looks to be bad news for intellectualist accounts of virtue. Virtue cannot necessarily involve the impressive levels of knowledge and understanding that are required by these accounts if an agent can possess a virtue despite the kind of epistemic failings just listed. Therefore, while Driver was wrong in her account of the nature of modesty, she may have been right in her suspicions of intellectualist understandings of virtue.

However, I now want to suggest that the trait of modesty is not actually doing anything special here. When discussing the “Inaccurate Opinion” objection, above, I defended my account of the nature of modesty against a rival account which demanded an intellectualist component in the form of relevant knowledge. My conclusion was that we should not add such an intellectualist amendment to MK. However, we can now see that it would be possible for this same argument to take place focusing on some other plausible (moral) virtue. The suggestion is made to add some form of intellectualist component and we have to consider whether or not such an amendment is necessary. We do this by considering cases where the amendment is not satisfied and asking whether or not the agent could still be rightly thought of as possessing the virtue in question. As a result of this we either endorse the intellectualised or the non-intellectualised account. This same process can take place for any of the candidate virtues and not just for the trait of modesty. Therefore, while the trait of modesty has received a great deal of philosophical attention, it is incorrect to think that this level of attention can be fully justified by modesty playing some special role in our understanding of virtue. If this more fundamental issue is our aim then the debate ought to move on to consider other approaches. Indeed, it may be the case that the strategy employed above will be a useful one – we consider examples where the agent suffers from severe and relevant epistemic handicaps (such as actually being a brain-in-a-vat) and we ask whether or not this disqualifies the agent from possessing the relevant virtue. Running through such a process for a range of different specific virtues and using a range of different suggested intellectualised amendments may do more to shed light on the fundamental issue of the nature of virtue than has the interesting quest for an account of modesty.



## Conclusion

The struggle to provide a successful account of the nature of modesty has become a fiercely competitive one in recent years. In this paper I have attempted to provide an account which adds to this vibrant and interesting debate. Modesty as kindness says that to be modest is to be disposed to present your accomplishments/positive attributes in a way that is sensitive to the potential negative impact on the well-being of others, where this disposition stems from a concern for that well-being. I have argued that this account is able to provide the benefits that are required for a successful account, as well as being able to respond to possible objections. As such, the modesty as kindness account is deserving of serious consideration within the modesty debate. On a further note, I have briefly questioned the assumption that modesty is capable of playing a special role in highlighting the nature of virtue more generally. I have suggested that the debate ought to now move on to consider other approaches and other specific virtues rather than continuing with the intense focus upon the trait of modesty alone.<sup>17</sup>

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