

Articles

A Distinction between the Concepts of Humility and Modesty

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There is a rich and growing philosophical literature on humility and modesty, but, as Sara Rushing observes, “a fair number of professional philosophers ... conflate humility with modesty without critically reflecting on the implications of treating the two terms as equivalent.”¹ This conflation is unsurprising, because in ordinary language the terms are often used synonymously and interchangeably.² Nonetheless, the

¹ Sara Rushing, “Comparative Humilities: Christian, Contemporary, and Confucian Conceptions of a Political Virtue,” *Polity* 45 (2013), p. 215.

² In the literature philosophers tend to focus on one term or the other, ‘humility’ or ‘modesty’ without considering that there may be a difference between them. Some philosophers note in passing that perhaps there is a difference. Daniel Statman says “There are some differences in the use of these two concepts ..., but I believe that they are relatively minor, and that essentially modesty and humility share the same basic features.” Thus he uses the terms interchangeably in “Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992), p. 420. A.T. Nuyen says we should not equate modesty and humility but then does not do much to develop the distinction, instead focusing on modesty in “Just Modesty,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998), p. 101. Alan T. Wilson says, “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” in “Modesty as Kindness,” *Ratio* 29 (2016), p. 84. Nicholas Dixon says, “Humility differs from modesty, though, in at least one respect. Humility

concepts are distinct.³ Rushing herself does not do the work to distinguish between the concepts of humility and modesty, but her reflection on humility in Christian and Confucian traditions does gesture at the difference that I will argue for: Humility is internal; it is a matter of thought and feeling. Modesty is external; it is a matter of expression. The term ‘humility’ is etymologically connected with the Latin *humus*, meaning earth or soil. Although it can have connotations of lowliness, the concept of humility is perhaps better understood as being “down to earth” in one’s perspective.⁴ The term ‘modesty’ comes from the Latin *modestia* and connotes moderation, propriety, and correctness of conduct, which, as we will see, is appropriate to the concept of modesty.

Reflecting on the etymologies, Fritz Allhoff draws the conclusion that, “Humility entails having a low opinion of oneself whereas modesty entails having a moderate opinion of oneself.”⁵

can take the form of the experience of being humbled, which happens when we are made aware or reminded of our deficiencies ... Modesty is an ongoing disposition, instead of something that can be inflicted on us by an unpleasant realization.” in “Modesty, Snobbery, and Pride,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 39 (2005), p. 419. Nicolas Bommarito takes modesty and humility to be “interchangeable” in “Modesty as a Virtue of Attention,” *Philosophical Review* 122 (2013), p. 93 note 1. Yotam Benziman treats humility and modesty as interchangeable in “The Nature of Modesty,” *Ethical Perspectives* 22 (2015), p. 435 note 3. J.L.A. Garcia says he will treat humility as identical with at least some states of modesty in “Being Unimpressed with Ourselves: Reconceiving Humility,” *Philosophia* 34 (2006), p. 417 note 1. Jennifer Cole Wright, Thomas Nadelhoffer, Lisa Thomson Ross, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong distinguish between humility and modesty without explaining the distinction or defining modesty in “Be it Ever so Humble: Proposing a Dual-dimension Account and Measurement of Humility,” *Self and Identity* 17 (2018), pp. 95, 96, 98, 101, 111, and 119 note 1.

³ James Kellenberger argues that ‘humility’ is polythetic. I would say the same of ‘modesty’. That is, there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions to be found among the various uses of the terms. The words are polythetic, but there are nonetheless distinct concepts. Concerning the word ‘humility’ see Kellenberger, “Humility,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (2010), p. 324; Cf. Nancy E. Snow, “Humility,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 29 (1995), pp. 203 ff.

⁴ Joseph Kupfer, “The Moral Perspective of Humility,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2003), p. 251.

⁵ Fritz Allhoff, “What Is Modesty?” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23 (2010), p. 184 note 3.

Jonathan L. Kvanvig rejects Allhoff's claim that the difference between humility and modesty is a matter of degree. Pointing to representative quotations from St. Augustine, Frank Lloyd Wright, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Jefferson, and others, Kvanvig claims that modesty concerns how one appears to others whereas humility is about one's self-assessment.⁶ More of an argument is needed.

G. Alex Sinha makes a passing wave at the conceptual distinction I will argue for, suggesting that humility is the private side and modesty is the public side; he also recognizes that that the concepts can be separated.⁷ However, Sinha chooses to merge the two concepts and goes on to use the terms 'humility' and 'modesty' interchangeably. Though I find much to agree with in Sinha's and Kvanvig's accounts, I will draw more on others to deliver a unique synthesis of ideas. The result fills a gap in the literature with the first paper devoted entirely to the conceptual distinction and relationship between humility and modesty.

In short, I will argue that humility is the virtue of proper perspective concerning one's talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments,⁸ whereas modesty is the virtue of proper expression concerning one's talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments.⁹ The star

⁶ Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *Faith and Humility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 178-181.

⁷ G. Alex Sinha makes a passing wave at the distinction in "Modernizing the Virtue of Humility," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90 (2012), p. 265, where he suggests that humility is the private side and modesty is the public side. He also refers to them as the epistemic and agentic and recognizes that that they can be separated, p. 261.

⁸ Others who define the internal in terms of proper perspective include Norvin Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), pp. 253-259; Snow, p. 210; and Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 420-428.

⁹ It may seem unique, and therefore questionable, that there would be two distinct virtues related to the same subject matter, one concerning internal perspective and the other concerning external expression. I do not think that humility and modesty are unique in this regard, however. There are other cases of virtues for which we recognize that internal perspective and external expression do not necessarily need to match. For example, concerning the truth, we may distinguish between the external expression of honesty and the internal

quarterback who, in an interview, shares the proper amount of credit with the team for a victory is modest, at least regarding the credit he deserves, at least on this occasion. If he shares that credit with the team in his own mind, then, all other things being equal, he is also humble regarding the credit, at least on this occasion. Humility and modesty do not have to go together, however. The quarterback could be modest, saying the right things, without being humble, i.e., without thinking or feeling those things. Indeed, as I shall argue, one's expression should not always be an exact reflection of one's internal perspective. Proper expression (modesty) is not always accurate expression.¹⁰

1. Humility

David Hume called humility a “monkish virtue,” and it is not hard to see why.¹¹ ‘Humility’ can have connotations of lowliness and even sinfulness. In this monkish sense, the humble person recognizes how small and insignificant she is and how unworthy of God's grace she is. Even if she is better than most other people in living up to God's commandments, she still falls far short.¹² From a God's eye view, the differences among humans amount to little, and we are all doomed without God's saving grace. If this is what humility is, then we can understand why Hume dismissed it.

perspective on truth, i.e., self-honesty. Thus, I can be untruthful in my spoken words (external) without being self-deceived (internal). Conversely, I can be self-deceived (internal) without being dishonest in my spoken words (external).¹⁰ When I use the word ‘should’ and when I speak of humility and modesty as virtues, I do not mean to speak in moral terms. Rather, I conceive of humility and modesty as practical virtues like punctuality, cleanliness, self-respect, open-mindedness, and politeness. A practical virtue is a trait called for by prudence, one that benefits its possessor. And as I shall argue, it generally benefits the individual to be humble and modest. Of course, others may also conceive of humility and modesty as moral or religious virtues in related senses. I am simply not making the case in those terms here, though some of what I argue may be useful for those who want to conceive of humility and modesty as moral or religious virtues.

¹¹ David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 270.

¹² Scott Woodcock actually equates humility, as opposed to modesty, with this kind of religious orientation in “The Social Dimensions of Modesty,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 38 (2008), p. 24.

My suggestion is that we can use an Aristotelian framework to conceive of humility as a mean between the deficiency of self-loathing and the excess of vanity.¹³ On my account, humility is a matter of proper perspective built on self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, however, is broader than the proper perspective that amounts to humility.¹⁴ Contrary to Julia Driver, humility is not a matter of ignorance.¹⁵ Yes, there can be something charming about the innocence of the person who does not realize how good or accomplished she is, but that ignorance is not in itself a good thing and should not be held up as a virtue to be emulated, even if that is the way the word ‘humility’ is commonly used. Rather, self-knowledge is an important element of proper perspective and thus humility. This may not seem to follow at first glance. After all, if one is truly good, gifted, talented, or accomplished, then knowing it would seem to preclude humility. This is not necessarily so, however. One does not need to underestimate oneself to be humble; in fact, if one underestimates oneself, then one is simply ignorant or self-deceived, not humble.

One can know how good one is and still be humble when this knowledge takes good fortune into account, thus producing proper perspective. The self-knowledge needed for proper perspective requires a sense of context and appreciation for the sources of one’s talents and abilities. Just as we consider mitigating circumstances in lessening the blame for our failures, so too we must consider good fortune, circumstances, and the help of others when looking at our accomplishments.¹⁶ One had the good fortune to be born with certain

¹³ Others who use an Aristotelian framework for humility and modesty include Nicholas D. Smith, “Modesty: A Contextual Account,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 82 (2008), p. 23; Michael W. Austin, “Is Humility a Virtue in the Context of Sport?” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31 (2014), p. 204; and Kupfer, p. 266.

¹⁴ Ian M. Church, “The Limitations of the Limitations-Owning Account of Intellectual Humility,” *Philosophia* 45 (2017), p. 1082.

¹⁵ Driver uses the word ‘modesty’ to refer to both the internal and the external. See *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 19. Cf. Julia Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 373-384.

¹⁶ A.T. Nuyen, “Just Modesty,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998), 101-109.

genes and to have certain environmental influences. This does not necessarily mean that one had supportive parents, teachers, or coaches. It could mean the opposite in some cases in which lack of support motivated one to work harder. Proper perspective includes recognizing the big picture and the long run. The star student or star athlete may be the best of her class or team, but there is a larger world in which her standing is diminished. And there are other areas of accomplishment, excellence, or success in which she does not measure up quite as well. Even if one were the world's best, proper perspective would produce humility.

At the time of this writing, Usain Bolt is the greatest runner in the 100-meter dash, and so it would be easy for him to lack humility.¹⁷ I do not know if Bolt actually lacks humility, but if he does, then there are certain things he should remind himself about to put things in proper perspective. First, although it is terrific to be that fast, he owes a lot to good genes and coaches. In other words, he owes some of his success to good fortune. It may be impossible for Bolt or anyone to determine exactly how much he owes his success to good fortune, but it will be easy for us to imagine how bad fortune would have prevented success. Bolt could have had a childhood disease or an adult injury that prevented him from becoming a world-class runner. For that matter, any number of unfortunate occurrences could have prevented his success. So, at the very least, he should be mindful of the fact the he owes much of his success to a lack of bad fortune. Second, he will not always be that fast. His ability is fleeting; he will soon enough be surpassed by younger runners. And alas, the records he has set will not last forever. Records are made to be broken as the cliché goes. Proper perspective requires that Bolt not just acknowledge the cliché, but rather that he truly recognize that in the grand sweep of time, he is just a momentary record holder. Recognition of the vastness of time and one's small place in it should be truly humbling. Third, being the fastest runner at the 100-meter dash, is not as important as many other things. Usain Bolt has not cured cancer or brought peace to the Middle East. A passing recognition that there are other greater accomplishments is not enough. For proper perspective, Bolt would need to contemplate and accept that his

¹⁷ Thanks for this example to Austin, p. 211. Flanagan uses the example of the fastest human, p. 425.

accomplishment does not rank all that high in the grander scheme of potential accomplishments. Even though Bolt has earned the right to take proper pride in his accomplishments, he would do well to keep that pride right sized. Indeed, that right-sized, proper pride is proper perspective concerning one's talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments. Thus, proper pride is humility. Aristotle describes his great-souled man (*megalopsychos*) as having proper pride, but I disagree with Aristotle on what constitutes proper pride. As will become clear, on my account, even those who are not worthy of great honors can be worthy of feeling proper pride.¹⁸

Usain Bolt is a real-world example, and real human beings have many limitations. For the sake of the argument, though, let us imagine that after retiring from running, Usain Bolt applies his tremendous work ethic to discovering a cure for cancer and bringing peace to the Middle East. Imagine that he succeeds in both endeavors, and imagine that he remains a devoted husband, father, and friend. He would then have surpassed Goethe and da Vinci in the scope of his accomplishments. Nonetheless, it would still be possible for Usain Bolt to be humble. While taking pride in his fantastic accomplishments, he could recognize that there are other diseases he has not cured and other regions of the world to which he has not brought peace. Historians may acclaim him the greatest human being ever to have lived, but he could still recognize that the span of human history is short and hopefully just at its beginning.

With the example of Bolt in mind, let us turn to a consideration of pride, which is often conceived as in opposition to humility.¹⁹ The excessive pride that is synonymous with vanity certainly is opposed to humility, but proper pride is not. Proper pride is humility, and it is simply a matter of feeling appropriately about oneself in light of one's talents, abilities, gifts, and accomplishments.²⁰ Proper pride, humility, is not a matter of thinking less highly of oneself than is warranted. It would be foolish and inappropriate for Usain Bolt not to feel very good about

¹⁸ Staman does *not* adopt the framework of means and extremes, but, like me, he links his account of humility with pride and notes the connection to Aristotle's great-souled man.

¹⁹ Kvanvig takes pride to be the paradigmatic contrast to humility, and he takes vanity to be the paradigmatic contrast to modesty, pp. 178-179.

²⁰ Cf. Benziman, p. 419; Richards, p. 255; and Dixon, 419.

himself. The challenge for Bolt is to keep that feeling right-sized. He has worked hard, accomplished much, and deserves the fame and money that come as the fruit of his labor. He deserves to stand on the podium and have a gold medal hung around his neck while the crowd applauds him. But he would not necessarily deserve to be moved to the top of an organ transplant list, because a person's place on such a list should not necessarily be a function of her accomplishments. Proper pride, humility, calls for Bolt to recognize this. He is ultimately a human being like any other.²¹

Few of us have Bolt's success, but most of us have his temptation to excessive pride or vanity.²² That is why self-knowledge is so important in this context. Humility involves self-knowledge, the product of the Delphic injunction to know thyself. As Michael Austin says, "Humility includes self-knowledge which undermines the ego-driven human tendency to overestimate one's abilities, accomplishments, and character."²³ The faulty perspective of lacking humility ultimately hurts the individual himself who fails to "own" his limitations.²⁴ This is why humility is a practical virtue. The person who

²¹ Mark D. White conceives this equality in Kantian terms in "A Modest Comment on McMullin: A Kantian Account of Modesty," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40 (2015), pp. 1-5. Thomas Nadelhoffer, Jennifer Cole Wright, Matthew Echols, Tyler Perini, Kelly Venezia, "Some Varieties of Humility Worth Wanting," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 14 (2017), speak of this as "existential awareness," p. 181. Other egalitarian accounts are offered by Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, "The Virtue of Modesty," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), pp. 238-246 and Daniel Statman, "Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992), pp. 420-438.

²² Jason Brennan, "Modesty without Illusion," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75 (2007), p. 121. Brennan endorses Adam Smith's view, according to which, "The Smithian modest agent employs the lower standard for others and a higher standard for himself because doing so increases the chances that he will make correct judgments and respond the correct way to the reasons that apply to them." I reject this approach because it is condescending and arrogant to apply a lower standard to others. It makes sense to do it when they are amateurs and you are a professional in a certain area, but otherwise we should all be on the same playing field and subject to the same rules and judgments.

²³ Austin, p. 205.

²⁴ Cf. Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-

lacks humility may, for example, put himself in harm's way, as in the case of the person who overestimates her ability as a skier and takes a trail that is much too challenging for someone of her limited ability. As we shall discuss in the next section, the immodest person hurts others (as well as himself) by giving expression to his improper perspective in the form of boastful speech or presumptuous behavior.

Before proceeding to the effects on others, though, we need to consider more carefully the nature of proper perspective on oneself. Hume says, "nothing is more useful to us in the conduct of life, than a due degree of pride, which makes us sensible to our own merit, and gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprises."²⁵ Hitting the mean of proper perspective is difficult, and proper perspective can allow for some inaccuracy. As Hume notes, "a due degree of pride" is helpful "in the conduct of life." In fact, in some circumstances, a slight overestimation of one's abilities may be helpful, as in the case of the confident salesperson or public speaker. But being too far out of touch with reality will likely, ultimately bring bad results. It may seem odd to call a person humble who overestimates some of his abilities, but humility is a delicate balancing act. Conceived as proper perspective, humility can allow for slightly overestimating oneself in some areas. Such balancing cannot be captured in an algorithm. What is most important is that one continues to recognize that fundamentally one's value is the same as that of all other human beings. As we will see in the next section, one can overestimate oneself and yet not be obnoxious. In such benign cases, the overestimation does not result in immodesty but rather appropriate confidence.²⁶

For some people, overestimation in some areas may actually be necessary to hit the mean. Although the dominant human tendency seems to be to overestimate our talents and abilities, some people have the opposite inclination. Those who naturally underestimate their talents

Snyder, "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94 (2017), pp. 509-539.

²⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Lewis A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 596-597.

²⁶ Wilson, p. 81. As Wilson says, "The modest agent can even *overestimate* their own level of ability."

and abilities will need to exaggerate them in their own minds in order to achieve an accurate assessment. Other people would be better served by slight underestimation because it can inspire improvement. In sum, there is no one-size-fits-all prescription when it comes to achieving the proper perspective that is humility.

Conceiving humility as a matter of proper perspective means that a person who is terribly deficient in some way but realizes it, can nonetheless be humble. For example, a bad teacher who realizes he is a bad teacher is humble with regard to his teaching abilities. Of course, this humility is overshadowed by his bad teaching. Nevertheless, we all know bad teachers who lack humility with regard to their teaching. Thus it makes sense to say of the bad teacher who recognizes his lack of ability, “at least he is humble about it.”

2. Modesty

As we have seen, humility is internal, and its direct consequences are personal. By contrast, modesty is external, and its direct consequences are interpersonal. Modesty helps us to avoid causing others pain, envy, and resentment. Immodesty can have advantages in some cases; some people are taken in and fooled by braggarts. And immodesty can even be charming in cases like Muhammad Ali’s poetic boasting. Modesty is thus a practical virtue with its eye on the big picture and the long run. Bragging and other immodest behavior may fool some of the people some of the time, but prudence counsels modesty for most people in most situations.

As with humility, we can conceive of modesty as a mean; it is the mean between an excess, called immodesty, and a deficiency, called self-denigration. Modesty is proper expression based on assessment of one’s talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments. It may be selective rather than total. As Driver says, “Persons are typically modest only in some respect or other—that is, they are modest regarding their work accomplishments, or hobbies, or specific skills, and so forth.”²⁷ Modesty benefits its possessor by helping her to get along with others, by not making others feel uncomfortable and (mis)judged. If human nature were not infected with envy, then modesty would be far less important

²⁷ Julia Driver, “Modesty and Ignorance,” *Ethics* 109 (1999), p. 830.

and valuable. Curiously, envy is usually directed at those just a little above us in status or accomplishment. For example, Driver notes that she is unlikely to be envious of Michael Jordan for his basketball abilities, but she is likely to become envious of her sister for winning neighborhood tennis matches.²⁸ Because human nature inclines us to be concerned with status, it is uncomfortable to be around someone who is immodest—his expression of elevated judgment of himself suggests lower judgment of us. Modesty thus requires you to “present your accomplishments/positive attributes in a way that is sensitive to the potential negative impact on the well-being of others.”²⁹ Gauging the appropriate presentation is not always easy. Because modesty is expected, sometimes a modest statement may not seem modest enough. We are often expected to understate ourselves, but sometimes we do not understate ourselves enough to satisfy others.

To a certain extent, modesty is context relative—modesty demands one thing with friends and another thing with strangers. It may demand one thing at one time or place and another thing at another time or place.³⁰ In some cases, sharing one’s honest self-assessment would be modest, whereas in other cases it would be immodest. Ironically, modesty may oblige a person to understate her self-assessment in order to spare someone else who is not properly humble from envy or ego-deflation. By contrast, certain contexts, for example job interviews, may call for a person to speak in ways that might be considered immodest in other contexts. Indeed, in a job interview, one can be modest in slightly over-stating one’s self-assessment. And among family or friends, it may actually be improper *not* to mention an accomplishment. As Scott Woodcock observes, “A close friend may be hurt by an agent who acts modestly when they interact, because by acting this way the agent reveals that she does not trust her friend to be vicariously pleased by the greatness of the agent’s accomplishments.”³¹ In fact, among friends a modest person need not be overly modest about her own modesty. As Ty Raterman says, “There is nothing odd about asserting ‘I am modest’ during a quiet conversation with a good friend about personal qualities

²⁸ Driver, p. 829.

²⁹ Wilson, p. 78.

³⁰ Cf. Sinha, p. 273.

³¹ Woodcock, p. 28.

one values possessing.”³² Indeed, there is nothing necessarily contradictory or self-refuting about such a statement.

Modesty is bound up with manners and honesty. Sensitivity often requires moderate expression that understates self-regard. In many cases, external expression should be lower than internal perspective. Even if one is humble, and thus one’s internal perspective is appropriate, it still may be hurtful to communicate one’s honest self-appraisal. For example, Julia’s sister Debby may know she is a better tennis player than Julia, but modesty may still oblige Debby to downplay her success in neighborhood matches so as not to arouse Julia’s envy. Part of Debby’s motivation may be that she recognizes that her tennis ability is a small thing that does not make her a more valuable person than her sister. As Irene McMullin says, “Modest people communicate this self-understanding through behavior motivated by the desire to ensure that their accomplishments do not cause pain to others. Through this tendency to de-emphasize their accomplishments, they communicate that they do not in fact believe they are ‘better’ than others, though they recognize that they do in fact rank higher on the particular social standard in question.”³³ In a sense, modesty can sometimes involve a slight deception in the service of communicating respect and regard. As Woodcock says, “It is possible for a person to knowingly regulate the way that she presents herself to others without being insincere.”³⁴ The deception sometimes involved in modesty can be sincere in its intent to communicate respect and regard, but it is still deception. For example, someone may say to a prolific author, “I really enjoyed your book.” Rather than ask, “Which book?”, the author may respond modestly by saying, “Thank you. It means a lot to me that you took the time and effort to read the book. I realize there are some boring parts.” The author’s response is deceptive; it implies that the author knows which book the reader means. Further, the response may elicit more details that will clarify which book is meant, and that will allow the author to thank the reader more fully. The response spares the reader from embarrassment

³² Ty Raterman, “On Modesty: Being Good and Knowing It without Flaunting It,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2006), p. 232.

³³ Irene McMullin, “A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuosity of Modesty,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010), p. 783.

³⁴ Woodcock, p. 11.

at not realizing that the author had written more than one book. Beyond that, the response spares the author from immodesty. In a perfect world populated by perfect people such deception would be unnecessary. A humble person, with proper perspective on her talents and accomplishments, could be completely honest and unfiltered in expressing her proper pride. We are not, however, perfect people. So, deception may be necessary when we are humble, and it may be even more necessary when we are not humble. Of course, deception is not always necessary. Many times, it is possible to be sensitive and communicate respect and regard without being deceptive or false.

False modesty can be obnoxious when it is obvious.³⁵ Too often, major award winners provide us with prime examples of cringeworthy false modesty, but we find such examples in the everyday world as well. When detected, false modesty may be insulting, condescending, or patronizing, but it is not necessarily so—and it may be preferable to boasting or other immodest displays. Hume seems to justify false modesty, saying, “some disguise in this particular is absolutely requisite; and ... if we harbor pride in our breasts, we must carry a fair outside and have the appearance of modesty and mutual deference in all our conduct and behavior.”³⁶

We can be modest as we can be polite, without it reflecting a state of mind. We do not speak about false manners, so why do we speak of false modesty? In fact, we appreciate etiquette when we know it is difficult, as, for example, we appreciate the good sportsmanship of shaking hands after the game all the more when we know it is difficult. It is not always blameworthy when inside and outside do not match. Listening to a young athlete being interviewed after a game, we can get the impression that the athlete is speaking lines she has practiced in giving credit to her teammates. There is no harm or blame here. By saying these words repeatedly the athlete may come to see their truth. Consider the star quarterback. If he lacks humility, then false modesty is appropriate. Repeatedly telling the press that his receivers deserve credit for the win may even help the quarterback to act his way into a

³⁵ Cf. Sinha, p. 264.

³⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Lewis A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 598.

new way of thinking. Treating people with respect can (with time and repetition) lead to feeling respect for them. Likewise, speaking and acting modestly can lead to humility, though not always. It remains true that plenty of modest people are not humble. They may be on their way to humility, but not all will reach that destination. In any event, recent empirical work concludes that “the folk concept of modesty seems to be primarily behavioral, rather than psychological. . . . most people attribute modesty to someone so long as she *says* something modest, regardless of her private assessments, motives, or beliefs about her own accomplishments.”³⁷ This does not mean that people are ordinarily careful about distinguishing between the words ‘humility’ and ‘modesty’, but it does suggest they would be receptive to my conceptual distinction between humility and modesty.

The upshot is that much of what is called false modesty is true and sincere in its goal of not causing harm or envy, even though it does not emanate from humility. There is a problematic form of “false modesty,” however, the kind of expression that would be better called “fake modesty,” an obvious sham. Think of the so-called “humble brag” whereby one communicates something impressive about oneself by couching it in false self-deprecation. For example, “I’m so absentminded. I almost forgot to send Harvard the deposit for my daughter’s enrollment.” Humble bragging is doubly obnoxious for its transparent attempt to deceive the listener into thinking one is not bragging. McMullin describes false modesty as “the dishonest and patronizing attempt to communicate to others that one does not believe one’s success to be definitive evidence of being better than they are, when in fact one *does* believe it.”³⁸ But what McMullin describes is fake modesty. Most of us are probably fooled by garden variety false modesty most of the time, and that is fine. Just as we are willing to accept false manners, we should be willing to accept false modesty. The real thing may be better in both cases, but there is a courtesy implicit in the deception. Well-meaning false modesty is a key ingredient in the glue that holds society together. As Nicolas Bommarito says, false modesty

³⁷ Sara Weaver, Mathieu Doucet, and John Turri, “It’s What’s on the Inside that Counts . . . Or is It?: Virtue and the Psychological Criteria of Modesty,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychiatry* 8 (2017), p. 655.

³⁸ McMullin, pp. 788-789.

“can often have good consequences by allowing people to get along better ... False modesty can also be the result of genuine good motives, such as the desire to spare another person’s feelings. ... It can also play a role in moral development—an important way to acquire many valuable traits is first to act as if you have a trait.”³⁹ Just as manners, false or not, hold society together and improve individuals, so too does modesty, false or not. Thus false modesty is effective in its social function. We are aware that it is pervasive, and yet we are regularly fooled by it, often willingly so. The best false modesty is sincere in its desire to avoid causing harm or envy, even if it is not an accurate reflection of internal perspective. Thus, unlike fake or transparent false modesty, the best false modesty is not obnoxious or perniciously deceptive. Quite the contrary, it is courteous and imperceptible.

We should note that because modesty is a matter of expression, one can be immodest in expression even when one is deficient in the proper pride that constitutes humility. For example, some braggarts boast out of a sense of insecurity; they do not feel proper pride. Similarly, some humble people do not manage to express themselves modestly. This can happen, for example, because a person is nervous or because the person does not know the etiquette required by a situation. In yet other cases, modest behavior can be mistaken for immodesty: we have all met that guy who appears stuck-up but is really just shy. Humility combined with introversion can be mistaken for snootiness and thus immodesty. Most humble people are unambiguously modest, but plenty of people who are modest in speech are not humble. It is tempting to think that if one avoids bragging and avoids sham displays of fake modesty, then one is modest. Such is not necessarily the case, however. Just as you do not necessarily have to tell someone that you are in pain for them to know it, you do not have to boast, condescend, or patronize for someone to know that you are vain. Lack of humility can come out sideways in behavior, manifesting as immodesty, and it is a failure of self-knowledge not to realize it. Body language, actions, and indirect speech can express improper perspective. Think of the polite waiter who clearly wants to spit in your soup. He goes through the proper motions and says the right things, but there is still a haughtiness about his behavior that shouts, “I am too good to be serving someone like you.”

³⁹ Bommarito, p. 112.

What is the solution? Should we become better thespians? Perhaps, to the extent that we wish to act our way into proper perspective. Ideally, modesty would be rooted in humility. But if we are imperfect in our humility we can at least be aware of that as a fault, and we can be aware that our lack of humility may find expression in immodest behavior, even if only subtly and indirectly. To the extent that we wish to get along well with others and avoid causing them envy or resentment, we are well motivated to rein in immodesty. Modesty takes discipline just as manners do, but modesty, like manners, can become habitual and automatic. To the extent that the relationship between modesty and humility is recursive, the discipline in practicing modesty can help develop the proper perspective of humility, thus making it easier in turn to be modest—a virtuous circle if ever there was one.⁴⁰

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