**Modesty as an excellence in moral perspective taking**

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In this paper I will argue that modesty (which, following common practice, I will use interchangeably with ‘humility’) is a virtue of excellence in moral perspective taking. The modest, or humble person, is proficient at adopting a moral stance which is valuable because it demonstrates a skillful attunement to social relations and counters the human tendency to value, in morally inappropriate hierarchical ways, persons who have made significant achievements. Modesty is valuable because it counters our tendencies to conflate the merit of personal achievement with more basic moral recognition. Modesty is a virtue because an apt expression of what is, and is not, morally salient in our attitudes toward persons, and is important because we are prone to conceit, arrogance, self-importance, and hero worship.

To develop my own account, I will take up three candidate features of modesty which have shaped recent discussions and argue that, while each of those features identifies something significant about humility, they each fail either to ground an analysis, or to plausibly explain the value of modesty. I will go on to argue that by conceiving of modesty as an excellence in moral perspective taking we can acknowledge the significance of the aforementioned features in a way that explains the value of modesty. In Section One, I consider the claim that the value of modesty lies in its capacity to avoid social problems, reactive negative emotions and destructive social rankings. I will argue that by understanding modesty’s value in these terms we risk defining it in a manner that promotes in-crowd advantages and preserves unjust forms of social privilege. In Section Two, I consider the claim that modesty can be unpacked as an indifference to how others evaluate one’s accomplishments. I argue that utter indifference to how one’s achievements are evaluated by others is not necessary for modesty, and can interfere with the modest person’s broader interest in preventing unjust social rankings. In Section Three, I will consider more generally the role that *credit* has played in some recent discussions. I begin by asking what is meant by claims to deserved credit, and argue that even if we grant that credit is deserved in any particular case, because the giving and taking of credit is a social activity, it will require a further independent justification. Any credit giving or taking consistent with modesty will have to be sensitive to the destructive social rankings to which modesty is a counterbalance and so it cannot, for example, promote illegitimate forms of social privilege. In Section Four I summarize what I take to be the virtues of the moral perspective taking account. I argue that because we need to take seriously concerns about unjust forms of social privilege in interpersonal interaction, the egalitarianism most relevant to an analysis of modesty will be moral egalitarianism. To make my case I highlight some differences with a competitor egalitarian account of modesty which focuses on social equity and equal social status.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Before I explain the moral perspective taking view, a few preliminary remarks are in order. As already mentioned, humility and modesty are typically used interchangeably in the recent literature, and yet we might wonder whether they are equivalent. For example, a person described as ‘modestly dressed’ is not likely to be described as ‘humbly dressed’. The persons described as ‘immodestly dressed’ are typically women and girls, and in that context ‘modesty’ concerns social and sexual norms, not moral virtue. I am not concerned with this use of the term. I will follow common practice, and take modesty and humility to be interchangeable, but with the following caveat. In common parlance, ‘humility’ has a *gravitas* that ‘modesty’ does not. Hence it might be supposed that ‘humility’ describes a deeper, more substantive moral phenomenon than does ‘modesty’. Moreover, perhaps partly due to its historical role in Christian philosophy, and its sometimes association with self-abasement, ‘humility’ might arouse worries about failures of self-respect that modesty does not.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yet modesty, precisely because it seems more comfortable within a secular, individualistic world view, might appear to fail to accommodate qualities substantive enough to constitute a *moral* virtue, making modesty be to humility what etiquette is to morality (Philippa Foot to the contrary). While this may be an issue worthy of further investigation, I do not pursue it here. I will proceed on the assumption that they can be used interchangeably, and note that my interest is in investigating the substantive moral virtue that is associated with their joint use.

Given the large literature on modesty, it is worth adumbrating the scope of my enterprise. In order to act with modesty a person must be accomplished in some dimension, have appropriate attitudes about herself in light of that accomplishment, and comport herself in a manner that is consistent with modesty. Modesty can be local, as when a person is modest with respect to a particular accomplishment, and global, as when a person is modest with respect to multiple accomplishments. A person who is locally modest in respect of a few accomplishments, but arrogant about others could not be said to be globally modest. Modesty admits of degrees.

The account of modesty that I will defend is a kind of moral egalitarianism[[3]](#endnote-3). On my view, the concern for others manifest in the virtuously modest person’s action is best understood as a commitment to the preservation of equal moral recognition of persons, as persons, in social contexts vulnerable to illegitimate hierarchical rankings. The virtuously modest person is able to maintain an appropriately egalitarian perspective in her interactions with others, even as the rest of us are mistakenly, perhaps unconsciously, persuaded that the accomplished person merits greater moral consideration. The excellence lies in the capacity to maintain the moral perspective. While the modest person will comport herself in such a way that she avoids bruising egos and inciting jealousy, modesty’s value does not lie in anything as superficial as this.

The account of the virtue of modesty which I am calling *modesty as moral perspective* has both a public and a private dimension. The private dimension, which concerns the agent’s attitudes toward accomplished persons, will directly influence the public dimension, which concerns the agent’s comportment in social situations. Other accounts of modesty that include a private dimension unpack it entirely by reference to the agent’s attitudes to herself alone.[[4]](#endnote-4) But on the moral perspective taking view, in its most general form, modesty involves appropriate attitudes about persons in light of their accomplishments, and this will include others. The person with the virtue of modesty would not wish to be judged superior *as a person* for what she has accomplished, and would not tend to judge others for their accomplishments in like manner. Consider how strange it would be for a person whose comportment suggests modesty (she is not arrogant, is humble in response to praise, deflects talk of her achievements, and never fails to acknowledge the role that others have played in her successes) to treat another highly accomplished person in an immodest way. Were she to artlessly draw attention to that person’s achievements, fawn over her, and generally appear to be regarding her as superior as a person because of these accomplishments, we would wonder whether she was modest after all, as her ranking behavior seems inconsistent with modesty. The point to see here is that the admirable attitudes possessed by the modest person are attitudes first and foremost concerning the moral recognition of persons as persons, and as such these attitudes will affect both her self-regard and her regard of others.

When considered as an excellence in moral perspective taking, the private dimension quite naturally excludes not only self-regarding attitudes such as conceit and arrogance, it also excludes other-regarding attitudes that would motivate obsequious flattering, idolizing or fawning over other accomplished persons. Modesty is a virtue because it counteracts our tendencies to treat, respond to, and project on to some persons a superior status that is inconsistent with moral equality. The person with modesty will not want this dubious form of recognition for herself, nor will she want to extend it to others. Nonetheless, as we are prone to be more easily persuaded of our own greatness than that of others, the most important set of attitudes are those the agent has about her own self and accomplishments, and so the private dimension of modesty primarily concerns the agent’s attitudes about herself, in light of her accomplishments.

The public dimension of modesty is clearly tied to these private, inner attitudes.[[5]](#endnote-5) As she is not impressed with herself for her accomplishments, the modest person will not brag, or draw attention to herself, and so will be unlikely to provoke competitive or envious reactions in others. The person with the virtue of modesty, even if fully recognizing her own achievements, will not make significant use of them in the self-narrative she offers to others. She will not invest her self-conception in those achievements as *her* achievements and, while holding them to be valuable, she will not suppose herself to have established greater moral status by having achieved them. While able to grant the significance of what she has accomplished, she will not be deeply personally invested in it as an account of who she is. She will be ‘unimpressed’ with herself, to use J.L.A Garcia’s apt phrasing.[[6]](#endnote-6)

**1. Modesty and destructive ranking behaviors**

It is often claimed that the good of modesty lies in its capacity to forestall social problems. Roughly, the idea is that the value of modesty lies in what it avoids - competition, and destructive mental states like envy, jealousy, or feelings of low self-worth in others. For example, Julia Driver (1989) argues that modesty alleviates the jealousy, envy and other competitive emotions; Alan T. Wilson (2016) argues that modesty is a disposition governing one’s self-presentation which includes a sensitivity to the possible negative effects on the well-being of others; and Sinha (2012) argues that the because she cares about others, the person with modesty will want to prevent others from feeling displeasure. In short, on some views, the good of modesty is said to lie in its positive social outcome, the forestalling of precisely the sorts of negative emotions that can arise when we interact with accomplished persons.

On one prominent account of modesty, its value lies in the fact that the actions of the modest person will obviate certain social problems. Driver (1999: 828) has claimed the value of modesty lies in the fact that the modest person ‘stops problems from arising in social situations’. According to Driver, modesty crucially involves an underestimation of one’s achievements, and ignorance of one’s merits.[[7]](#endnote-7) The ignorance is socially valuable because it indicates a disinclination to engage in destructive ranking behaviors; it is a ‘corrective of ranking behavior’ (1999: 834). Driver’s underestimation account of humility makes it principally an epistemic trait (a false belief about one’s worth) with utility promoting effects. Because she is ignorant of the extent of her worth, the person with humility does not over-rank herself, and this is socially valuable. So, according to Driver (1999: 828), humility is a virtue of ignorance: ‘People in general have a tendency to rank and estimate worth relative to others, and this tendency is destructive. The modest person is one who does not spend a lot of time ranking, who does not feel the need to do so, and thus remains ignorant to the full extent of self-worth (to a limited extent)’.

Driver’s account, while insightful, is inadequate for several reasons. First, it does not provide a convincing definition of modesty. As G.F. Schueler (1997) has pointed out, other character traits, such as dull-wittedness or inattentiveness, do not provoke destructive ranking behaviors and we do not regard them as good for that reason. Something more is needed to explain what makes acts modest. Furthermore, Garcia (2006: 422) has convincingly argued that Driver has overestimated the significance of underestimation; underestimation is neither necessary for modesty, as a person might accurately recognize the significance of her achievements and be humble about them, nor it is sufficient for modesty as she might underestimate them and brag about them nonetheless. What is lacking in Driver’s view is a conceptual connection between an underestimation of self-worth and the purported social good.

Clearly there is something to the idea that a strong sense of one’s merit can be morally dangerous as it might lead to self-conceit. But there is no reason to suppose that having an inaccurate assessment of the significance of one’s achievements is necessary for modesty.[[8]](#endnote-8) Driver (2001: 27) rightly identifies modesty as a corrective to ‘the vice of overranking’, but her account fails to demonstrate that underestimating one’s own merit is a viable solution to that moral danger. It seems unlikely that the solution to a concern with a destructive tendency to rank lies in an appeal to more ranking (albeit, underestimating). So let us consider more carefully just how modesty is valuable by seeking clarity about the moral danger it is supposed to forestall. Let us grant that the value of modesty lies, at least in part, in its capacity to avoid destructive ranking behaviors, and turn to a discussion of precisely what makes some ranking behaviors destructive. In the remainder of this section I will try to show that the moral danger obviated by modesty is not plausibly conceived as social problems, or negative competitive emotions. It is not always good to spare others’ feelings. Some forms of social and interpersonal injustice rely on the presumed badness of negative feelings as a way of preserving a questionable hierarchy. The social and interpersonal good of modesty runs deeper, expressing a finely developed sense of how persons matter, morally speaking.

Envy, jealousy and low self-worth are often identified as negative emotions and attitudes to which the modest person is sensitive because others would be harmed by the unhealthy interpersonal rankings that can naturally arise in the face of greatly accomplished people. The badness of these states is presumptively their tendency toward unhealthy competitiveness, and the correlative good of modesty is thought to be its other-regarding concern. To see, however, that modesty is compatible with deliberately acting in a manner that will predictably provoke jealousy or envy, consider the following example.

Ann is an accomplished academic and world traveler, and she has the virtue of modesty. Her sister Gertrude is not highly accomplished, envies Ann’s travels, and is not modest. Gertrude is competitive with her sister and often on the look out for evidence that she is better than Ann in this or that dimension. Ann recognizes this and whenever possible, skillfully avoids mention of her latest achievements and adventures. But given Gertrude’s competitive nature, it is not always possible for her to avoid inciting her jealousy, envy, and other destructive competitive attitudes. To avoid these completely, she would have to be dishonest or maintain only a very superficial sort of relationship with her sister. If modesty required that she always avoid arousing competition, even in her competitive sister, then it would put limits on the depth of that relationship. It might even seem to require a patronizing attitude toward Gertrude - treating her as a kind of emotional invalid. In order to treat Gertrude and herself with respect, Ann will sometimes have to allow that her sister is responsible for her own competitive attitudes and, in some sense, disregard her feelings. In such a case, Ann could say something, knowing that it could well cause destructive ranking habits in her sister, and nonetheless continue to be a modest person. If this sort of case is possible, then the good of modesty cannot be understood as the product of avoiding these destructive ranking attitudes. The modest person can occasionally knowingly provoke destructive emotions in others. The good of modesty is not that it avoids negative feelings in competitive people; the obsequious person might have this aim.

To refine our sense of the destructive social rankings which modesty is said to alleviate, let us consider another example. Jan is a very accomplished logician. In fact, she has been distinguished as the best logician in Europe for three consecutive years by *European Logic Weekly*. Jan enjoys her work, regards her achievements as significant, but doesn’t have her ego bound up in them. She doesn’t draw attention to achievements in order to bolster her sense of herself, and she often downplays them when they are mentioned. Jan is disinclined to rank people, let alone rank herself highly in comparison with others. She is sensitive to the destructive capacity of our ranking tendencies; she is virtuously modest. Suppose that it becomes clear to Jan that, for the good of her department, and in order to secure funding without which the department will collapse, she should be recognized in her department’s latest funding application as the best logician in Europe. Given that Jan can reliably predict that the ranking will arouse envy and competitiveness in her colleagues, must she, in order to remain modest, resist the move to have herself prominently and positively ranked in this manner?

I don’t think so. We can imagine that she hates to draw attention to herself in this way, but does it for the good of her department. Without seeking personal aggrandizement, she acts in a manner that will incite destructive ranking judgements in others, but her attitude toward the ranking is entirely instrumental and without consequence for her ego. Indeed, we can imagine Jan realizing that she is risking her reputation as modest by insisting on the ranking (her colleagues might think her conceited as a result) and yet be indifferent to this possibility. Our conception of modesty should not exclude this sort of case. Therefore, we should not understand the good of modesty in terms of its capacity to obviate destructive ranking behaviors in others.

However, if we understand the modest person to be operating with a sensitivity to how social relations can be wrongly influenced by hierarchical tendencies, then we can understand both her disposition typically to avoid provoking negative emotions in others and her willingness, on occasion, to elicit them. The humble person will be sensitive to her role in the production of negative emotions in others, but the moral significance of this sensitivity is the expression of a commitment to a kind of egalitarian moral perspective; it is not valuable because negative emotions are themselves bad.

The concern for others manifest in the virtuously modest person’s action is best understood as a commitment to preserving equal moral recognition of persons as persons, in a social context vulnerable to illegitimate hierarchical rankings. This egalitarian concern allows that the modest person can act in ways that would predictably provoke feelings of envy, or low self-worth in certain others, and remain modest. While disinclined to rank people for their accomplishments, she will be open to doing so if it seems required by the situation, in order to counter illegitimate hierarchical moral rankings. It is relevant that she is neither promoting ranking evaluations in an attempt to have others think more highly of her, nor is she manipulating the tendency to ranking judgements to personal advantage. On the modesty as moral perspective account, a person with modesty might, for example, speak without the intention of self-promotion, out of a commitment to uphold egalitarian standards for moral recognition, and predictably cause envy in a competitive colleague without violating the requirements of modesty. The public dimension of modesty here invokes a commitment to avoiding the habit of encountering persons as, in effect, more and less morally worthy due to their accomplishments. It can be very easy to lose moral perspective; modesty counters this.

It might be objected, that all my argument shows is that modesty is consistent with, on rare occasions, knowingly contributing to some destructive social ranking behaviors for good reasons, it does not show that modesty involves a commitment to anything as robust as an egalitarian moral perspective. A revised account of the view that humility’s value lies in its avoiding social problems could simply grant that humility is valued because it typically has this result. However, this objection fails because insofar as it allows that the modest person generally comports herself in a manner that will avoid destructive ranking behaviors, but admits of exceptions when a greater social good is at stake, it will owe an account of what greater ‘social problem’ is obviated by the atypical behavior. The problem with vague talk of social problems being prevented by cautious speech and diligent attention to the feelings of others is that it can be consistent with the preservation of forms of privilege that ought, morally, to be challenged. Without a commitment to something like the egalitarian standpoint I have proposed, *social problems* can be understood in ways that preserve in-crowd advantages that the person with the virtue of humility would eschew. So we do need to think of modesty as related to an egalitarian moral perspective. The following example should illuminate this point.

Fran is a member of a minority community and over the course of her career, has accomplished a great deal in her field. Suppose that it is true that her accomplishments are not regarded as highly as they would be were she not a member of a minority community and not a woman; as a social scientist, she has ample evidence documenting this. Suppose also that she doesn’t much care how her accomplishments are viewed, what matters to her is that she is, by her own lights, making progress in her field. We can suppose that she has a credible assessment of the merits of her own achievements and doesn’t lose any sleep over the fact that they are undervalued by her own colleagues. Fran is unimpressed with herself in the sense that her sense of her value as a person is not tied to how others are judging her work. She is modest. Now suppose that she finds herself in a circumstance where her work is being undervalued in an institutional context, and in order to promote needed social change, she feels compelled to draw attention to the significance and extent of her achievements. She might think to herself that it would be harmful to remain silent in this situation; for the institution to be just it must become aware of its own bias, and this might require that she, given the circumstances, draw attention to her own accomplishments and lead others to recognize their significance. Of course, this could be done well or badly, but we can imagine her speaking skillfully and doing so because she eschews complicity in the maintenance of an unjust social hierarchy. Fran may well know that this is likely to cause social problems in that it will lead to rancor, provoke jealousy, and encourage the destructive ranking tendencies of others so disposed but nonetheless, use her status to bring attention to the problematic nature of the existing social hierarchy. This would not indicate a lack of modesty.

These examples pose problems for the analysis of the value of modesty as avoiding social problems and destructive social rankings. The modesty as moral perspective account allows that persons with modesty can challenge social hierarchies, for on it modesty is valuable as a counterbalance to valuing people in inappropriately hierarchical ways. The focus on negative feelings in others, and rather vague talk about the avoidance of social problems leaves an analysis of modesty’s value blind to subtle structures of over and under-valuing that pervade human interaction. The social function of modesty runs deeper than these views have supposed. One clear moral danger in ranking as it relates to achievements and to the very accomplished, is that it is easy to be misled into conceiving of the very accomplished person whose accomplishments are socially acknowledged, as meriting a higher form of moral regard, or better treatment, as a result of those accomplishments. Accounts of modesty which take its private dimension to concern only oneself, neglect the fact that the accomplishments of others tend to prejudice our judgements of them. But *ceteris paribus*, a rapist with a degree from a prestigious university merits no different treatment than a rapist without a high school education. Human nature inclines us to extend special consideration to persons when we find something admirable in them, and so the worry about destructive social rankings is entirely legitimate. The person of modesty models an exceptional capacity to avoid this moral failure. I have accepted the claim that modesty is a corrective to destructive social rankings, but rejected the analysis of the bad that is avoided as negative feelings to be implausibly superficial. The danger in inappropriate ranking concerns hierarchies more generally, not just self-importance.

**2. Modesty and indifference**

All accounts of modesty grant that even while acknowledging the value of her accomplishments, the modest person will not seek praise, indeed, she may well feel uncomfortable accepting it. The modest person cares about what she accomplishes, but does not care about impressing others with these accomplishments. So the modest, highly accomplished author, scientist, Olympian, philosopher, etc., can have a clear-eyed assessment of the significance of her contribution but she will not invest a great deal of her sense of self in thinking that it was she who achieved it. In this way we can understand her to be relatively indifferent to what others think of her in light of her accomplishments. She will, as Garcia (2006: 417) puts it, ‘assign little prominence’ to the possession of qualities she possesses and might well take pride in, as for her there is ‘little personally salient in these qualities and accomplishments’. Hence, indifference to the appraisal of one’s accomplishments seems to play a role in the psychology of the modest person.

While many have supposed that a lack of concern for how one’s accomplishments are appraised by others is an indicator of modesty, Schueler has attempted to ground modesty on indifference. Schueler has argued that modesty is, most fundamentally, a lack of concern about (an indifference to) whether others are impressed by one’s accomplishments. In this section I will take up his account and argue that while indifference features in modesty, it is not constitutive of it. Schueler’s conception of the modest person is compelling precisely because indifference to others’ appraisal of one’s accomplishments plays a psychological role in maintaining an egalitarian perspective. By taking up several objections to his account, I hope to show that the moral value of indifference lies in a commitment to the preservation of morally equitable judgements in contexts vulnerable to illegitimate hierarchical ranking.

Schueler takes indifference to impressing others to be definitive of modesty. The modest person is free from the desire to impress. According to Schueler (1997: 485): ‘A modest person cares about the things she accomplished but not about being evaluated highly for these accomplishments. She cares, that is, about what is valuable, genuinely valuable, not about getting credit for what she has done’. He adds that to be modest one must also have some accomplishments, and be aware of them as accomplishments. Without adding these conditions, the indifferent and unaccomplished layabout could be said to be modest, and the naive farm kid who jumps fences like an Olympic caliber athlete, but thinks everybody can do this would count as modest (1997: 479).

The challenge for Schueler is to show that indifference to how others respond to her accomplishments is sufficiently refined to satisfy a plausible description of the character of the modest person. His account helps to make sense of the thought that the modest person will be unimpressed with herself and will not tend to narrate her experience through her achievements. She cares about her accomplishments, but does not care about being known for them. So according to Schueler, the modest person can care about how others evaluate her accomplishments, and care about how well they evaluate her overall, but cannot care about how others evaluate her *as the producer of those accomplishments*. The appeal to indifference seems intended to rule out a kind of unjust social advantage that arises when accomplished persons are judged better as *persons,* given their accomplishments. We know that the person who is an accomplished tennis player is not *thereby* a better person than his mediocre rival, but we can be inclined to mistakenly grant him an undue moral or social status. This seems to be what Schueler’s distinction between an evaluation of the person overall, and an evaluation of the person as the producer of those accomplishments, seems to target.

An accomplished and humble author, Schueler grants (1997: 480), can care about the criticism leveled at her work without being immodest. Caring about the criticism could signify a legitimate concern about the work’s actual merit, for example, if the critic claimed it was not a significant accomplishment. Modesty requires indifference concerning how people regard her as the producer of the accomplishments, it does not require that the modest person cares nothing for how her accomplishments are evaluated.

It has been objected that indifference fails to ground modesty because many forms of caring about how others view us are either innocuous or morally valuable. Sinha (2012: 271) proposes the following case as a counter-example: a PhD student desires that, when he completes his PhD, his mother be proud of him for completing his PhD. Sinha suggests that this is shows indifference to be overrated, as such desires to be thought of highly are natural and harmless. Driver has also argued that caring about how others regard one’s accomplishments is not itself bad, and might even be a sign of consideration. To demonstrate that some forms of concern with appraisal are not morally pernicious, Driver (1999: 832) advances a counter-example: a ‘Ghandi-like figure’ who is ‘deeply concerned with promoting freedom and peace’ and who nonetheless ‘cares intensely about how others perceive him and his work because he realizes that the success of his mission depends upon their perception of it as worthwhile, and to some extent, their perception of him as a morally worthy individual. He needs to set a good example’. The Ghandi-like person is not utterly indifferent to how others are appraising him for his accomplishments; it is a mistake to suppose that *that* fact about him makes him lack modesty.

I agree with Driver that the Ghandi-like person satisfies the conditions of modesty; requiring utter indifference about whether or not others are impressed by his accomplishments seems to overstate the moral value of indifference. However, I hasten to add that the Gandhi-like person lacks a desire to *impress* others, in the usual sense of the term. What he has is a desire to have his political, moral and spiritual commitments understood to be as admirable as they are so that they will be more likely to be realized. To the extent that *that* desire constitutes a concern with how others are appraising one’s accomplishments it makes utter indifference problematic, but the intuition that the modest person cares nothing about impressing others remains intact. The interest in being correctly characterized is not the same as the interest in impressing others, taking credit, or wanting others’ high regard. The Ghandi-like person could not be modest and, say, care about how others are evaluating his accomplishments for the sake of his legacy. So the counter-example shows that some concern with how one’s achievements are evaluated is consistent with modesty, and that utter indifference is not required. But what sort of concern with how one’s achievements are evaluated befits modesty?

To answer this question we need to consider which forms of concern tend to promote or coincide with illegitimate hierarchical rankings conflating accomplishment and more basic moral recognition. I have already argued that the social function of modesty must not be blind to subtle structures of over and under-valuing others that pervade moral interaction, so concern that befits modesty cannot reintroduce questionable hierarchies. But the question of whether or not a concern for how one’s achievements are judged is morally innocuous is rather complex. Consider the example of the PhD student who wants his mother to be proud of his accomplishment. Does the student want his mother to have an appreciation of his ability, and to recognize his effort and perseverance? Or, does he want to *make an impression* on her by obtaining a PhD? The former is innocuous, the latter is not. The desire that a parent be proud of one’s accomplishment is not the same as the desire to impress that person; when others have pride in our accomplishments, shared values are acknowledged. The desire to impress, by contrast, indicates an interest in social rank. If the PhD student desires that his mother give him a higher ranking *as a son*, it would not be morally innocuous, particularly if he has siblings. So it is not clear to me that Sinha’s example of the PhD student clearly identifies the problem with utter indifference. To be fair, his argument trades on the claim that Schueler’s distinction between caring about how one is regarded overall and caring about how one is regarded for one’s accomplishments, cannot be clearly made. Why, Sinha asks, is modesty consistent with caring about how one is regarded overall but not consistent with caring about how one is regarded for one’s accomplishments?

Sinha takes the purported arbitrariness to suggest that caring about how one is regarded for one’s accomplishments is less compromising than we might have thought, and goes on to argue for an account of modesty that is more permissive in this regard. In the next section I will take up this argument in the context of a larger discussion of modesty and credit-taking, and argue that it is too permissive and so reinforces questionable hierarchical rankings. My own answer to the question ‘What sort of concern with how one’s achievements are evaluated befits modesty?’ is that it must be concern consistent with the aim of countering tendencies toward socially-destructive rankings. The concern for others’ appraisal in the Ghandi-like case, or in the Fran case, pose no problem for modesty because the concern for others’ appraisal is indirect and does not serve the end of increased self-regard.

On the modesty as moral perspective account of humility, the modest person manifests a skillful attunement to social relations that is responsive to inappropriate rankings and needless hierarchical assessments. It is the commitment to maintaining equal moral recognition that we value in the person with the virtue of modesty. Because she cares about her accomplishments, but not about being highly regarded for them, she will be largely indifferent to how she is appraised in respect of them. But the moral significance of the indifference lies in the commitment to the principle that first and foremost in any interaction, each person deserves moral recognition and respect, and that our appreciation of the achievements of the accomplished can interfere with this. On this view, modesty can allow for caring about whether or not others are impressed with her accomplishments insofar as it is part of a rejection of social practices which tend to imply that some persons count more than others. The moral perspective account of modesty can leave room for reasonable concern about how others view us because it does not represent modesty as a lack of concern about other-appraisal, but instead targets the accomplished agent’s attitudes in relation to her role in egalitarian practices of moral recognition which, given human tendencies to competitiveness, raise special problems for the accomplished person.

**3. Modesty and credit**

All accounts of modesty seem to accept that the good of modesty is, at least partially, explained by its function as a corrective of ranking behaviors. Our tendencies to rank ourselves and others lead to moral and social problems, and modesty helps to counter-act these tendencies. We might suppose then, that theorists of modesty distance themselves from all but absolutely necessary modes of ranking (such as seen in the example of the best logician in Europe) on the part of the person with humility. But this is not the case. In some literature on humility the concept of credit plays a substantial role. For example, Driver (1999: 834) claims that the person with humility is ‘giving up, in effect, something like credit that she is entitled to or belief as to her self-worth in some (limited) respect’. A.T. Nuyen (1998: 108) argues that modesty involves being equitable with respect to apportioning credit for accomplishments; the modest person will want to allot credit to everyone who has had a share in his achievements. And Sinha (2012: 265) argues that ‘where you have no good reason to think that claiming your credit conflicts with the feelings of others, you don’t act immodestly in accepting it’. On these views, modesty involves an appeal to deserved credit, due oneself and possibly others.

I have already argued that the cure for destructive social ranking is not more ranking. In this section I will further flesh out this claim by drawing attention to some of the problems that arise when credit features more predominantly in an account of modesty. I will do this by first considering what we mean when we speak of *deserving credit* in this context, and second, by taking up an account of modesty on which the modest person can take deserved credit provided that he is not shirking his duties in so doing, nor hurting others. I will argue that appeals to deserved credit must be defended by appeal to norms that are themselves consistent with the modesty’s role as a corrective to ranking behavior; they cannot assume the authority of questionable social privilege. I will show that while the modesty as a moral perspective view does not emphasize appeals to deserved credit, it can allow for it, and do so in a way that does not undermine its function as a counterbalance to destructive social ranking.

While different conceptions of credit have been advanced or assumed, most hold that the modest person is deserving of credit and then put constraints on the conditions under which credit is appropriately allotted or sought. Schueler’s early account of modesty (1997) utilized an atypical notion of credit, in that it suggested the modest person to have ‘moved beyond’ credit. He claimed that once a person recognizes that her accomplishments depend upon conditions not of her own making, including genetics, social and educational advantages: ‘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’ (1997: 484). Schueler (1999) changed his position in response to a challenge leveled by Driver, and subsequent literature has generally assumed that talk of credit for one’s accomplishments is uncontroversial. I make note of this because I aim to show that claims of credit are more controversial than typically supposed.

What does it mean to say that someone deserves credit for their accomplishments? An implausibly strong realist account of personal credit would hold that the person’s accomplishments should be recognized by others because they are directly and entirely due to her. This is implausibly strong because our confidence in individualistic personal merit does erode as we consider the numerous, contingent conditions that contribute to particular human accomplishments. If talk of deserved credit implies an appeal to a view from nowhere kind of objectivity from which such matters can be ascertained, then it would be a mere conceptual possibility, not ascertainable by practical reason. We can give up on a view from nowhere account of deserved credit, however, without giving up on legitimate talk of credit. We can appeal instead to conventions regarding credit, for which there are good practical reasons.

With this in mind, let us proceed on the supposition that we can sensibly talk about credit being sometimes deserved by some persons. What does it mean to say that a person *deserves credit* for something? Of course the word *credit* can be used in a variety of ways. In a straightforward sense, credit might simply refer to the fact that we can legitimately claim that someone did something. Ben wrote the book, not Charlie. So if royalties should be paid to the book’s author, they should go to Ben not Charlie. This sense of credit (simply acknowledging the facts on the ground) can remain silent on questions of ultimate merit: it might well be that, were it not for Ben’s Mom, who faithfully read to him every night before bed, and then worked two jobs to pay for his university education, Ben would not have become an accomplished author. But she did not write the book.

A different sense of credit involves the notion of a debt; for someone to have earned credit is for someone else to owe a debt. On this understanding, the claim that the accomplished person deserves credit would imply that (some of) the rest of us owe her something as a result of those accomplishments. Generally speaking, this seems implausible. Given my lack of interest in sports and my utter disregard for the spectacle the Olympics has become, even a gold-medal Olympian’s achievement might signify very little to me. By acknowledging that she is the best in the world at this time in her sport, I would not have payed a debt she is owed. And we can imagine an Olympian who cares little about logic, but acknowledges that it is indeed an achievement to be deemed the best logician in Europe three years in a row without thereby discharging a debt to her. So clearly that cannot be the relevant sense of credit.

More plausibly, credit is being used to pick out something like recognition. After all, we tend to admire people for their accomplishments. Perhaps credit picks out a recognition that the person merits as a result of the accomplishment? This interpretation is weaker in that it doesn’t suggest the accomplished person is *owed* recognition (and so could perhaps complain that she was not being given her due if we failed to recognize her) but only that she *merits* recognition. Those failing to give the recognition would be failing to value or appreciate something of actual value, but would not be failing to pay their dues, so to speak. *Deserved credit* might be thought of in ideal-observer terms, so that under optimal circumstances and full information, the accomplishment would be judged to be meritorious. This is more plausible than the strongly realist alternative. On this view, if deserving creditis meriting a certain kind of response, then we can say that the Olympian’s achievement merits admiration (or appreciation) whether or not others respond to her in this way; her achievement is a good and so the kind of thing that should be admired or appreciated.

But even granting that we can unpack *deserving credit* in these terms, it should be clear that the question of whether and how deserved credit should be acknowledged on a particular occasion is a separate issue. That is, it does not follow from the fact that some accomplished person deserves credit that any particular show of appreciation is thereby appropriate. Because the giving and taking of credit is a social activity and highly context dependent, it will require a separate justification. For example, the mother who realizes that her son is trying to gain her approval by impressing her with his accomplishments might reasonably want to avoid fueling her son’s tendency to think he must achieve in order to merit her love and attention. In short, if *deserving credit* means roughly meriting recognition, then it is not something the person is owed in any straightforward sense, and questions of how the accomplishment should be acknowledged, and by whom, remain open.

To clarify my concern over the appeal to deserved credit in accounts of modesty, I will take up an example from Sinha’s carefully worked out position, on which modesty is a needed suppression of ego in order that duty may be fulfilled.[[9]](#endnote-9) Sinha distinguishes between private and public dimensions of modesty which he takes to be ‘logically distinct and practically independent’, arguing that private modesty concerns the agent’s attitudes about her merits as influenced by self-indulgence, while public modesty concerns the agent’s comportment regarding her merits. On his account the modest person can have accurate judgements about her accomplishments; for public modesty she must act in a manner that demonstrates appropriate concern for the feelings of others. So the modest person may have a high opinion of himself if it is justified and he comports himself in a modest way. In defending this claim, Sinha employs the example of Roger Federer who, from 2004-2008 was almost without interruption, ranked the best men’s tennis player in the world. Given the facts, prior to the next match for the men’s tennis title, it would have been entirely reasonable for Federer to believe of himself that he was the better player. Simply holding this belief would not make him immodest, Sinha rightly points out. But is it an attitude he could publicly express while maintaining public modesty?

Sinha asks us to imagine a post-championship interview in which Federer is asked publicly about his own victory. In order to have public humility, he claims, Federer must respond with sincere concern for the feelings of others, in this case his opponent. According to Sinha, failures of public modesty occur when the inclination to self-promotion leads one to disregard the feelings of others. The publicly modest person will typically care more about the feelings of others than he will care about ‘accepting legitimate credit’, and so he will avoid taking credit when it produces negative emotions in others. The publicly modest person will typically want to prevent others ‘from experiencing displeasure, whether minor irritation or public humiliation’ (2012: 265).

Sinha is keen to preserve for the accomplished person, the credit that is purportedly his due. According to Sinha, the accomplished person can claim deserved credit if doing so doesn’t conflict with the requirements of duty. In the privacy of his own home, perhaps with his spouse, Federer could ‘express the superiority that he can legitimately claim’, as ‘If we are objectively warranted in claiming credit, and concern for others does not offer a good reason to avoid doing so, why should humility prohibit taking what is rightfully ours?’ (2012: 264). As his spouse wouldn’t be hurt by his expressed belief in his own superiority, and it may even bring her pleasure, in this context he could enjoy his superiority publicly without immodesty, according to Sinha. It seems to me that this line of reasoning would allow that Federer could also claim his credit and express his superiority in the privacy of his own home with close friends who would also enjoy his expression of superiority. However, the supposition that the fact that intimate others find pleasure in his remarks leaves them consistent with modesty is dubious. It might well cause his spouse or friends to feel pleasantly self-important by way of their connection to a tennis star! This is commonplace in hero worship. Clearly such emotions are themselves part of the destructive social rankings to which modesty is said to be a counterbalance. So, Sinha’s discussion is unconvincing. And, as I’ve already shown, the social good of modesty is not adequately explained by reference to the avoidance of negative emotions as that standard is superficial, tolerating questionable but socially sanctioned social rankings.

Sinha wants it to be possible for the modest person to take credit, and supposes that this can be managed provided that others’ feelings are considered, and one’s ego doesn’t run amok. But the desire for personal credit is a clear indication that the ego is already active in a problematic way. The appeal to credit in the examples of the Ghandi-like person, Ann, and Fran, involve no similar desire for personal credit. On the recognition view of credit, we can grant that Federer has achieved something of significance (as a matter of fact) and balk at any further claim of recognition, especially given the over-valuation of mens’ sports. It is simply not obvious that Federer merits anything more, let alone that there is a credit that ‘rightfully’ belongs to him. At the very least, an argument explaining its justification is needed. Recognition occurs in a social context. In this context, the achievements of some may arbitrarily be accorded a prominence denied to others. If modesty is indeed a corrective of ranking behavior then it must acknowledge the context in which rankings and claims to credit are made. To fail to do so while making use of a notion of deserved credit would be to fail to take seriously the extent of the social problems arising from destructive ranking behaviors, and promote a superficial account of modesty, constrained by the status quo.

Regarding private modesty, Sinha’s (2012: 263) account allows that privately ‘Federer could remain modest while enjoying his superiority over’ his opponent provided that ‘he takes no more pleasure than is objectively warranted based on the magnitude of his achievement’. But this assumes a strong and questionable appeal to a view from nowhere conception of deserved credit. We might well ask just how much pleasure is objectively warranted by such an achievement? Is it significantly more than being the second best men’s tennis player in the world? How does the magnitude of that achievement compare to the magnitude of the achievement in the Ghandi-like person case? It is simply not clear that sense can be made of an objective amount of credit that Federer deserves for his accomplishment.

While Sinha is right that a remark to one’s spouse expressing a correct, if positive, self-ranking does not, on its own, make one immodest, his portrayal of the person with modesty is not compelling. People with modesty do not enjoy their own superiority over others, either publicly or privately. Enjoying the fact of an accomplishment is entirely different from enjoying the fact of one’s having defeated another. When one finds pleasure in the thought ‘I am the best men’s tennis player in the world’, the object of pleasure is the achievement, and when one finds pleasure in the thought ‘I’m superior over my, now bested, opponent’, the object of pleasure is his defeat. The former can be consistent with a commitment to avoid destructive rankings, but the latter cannot, as it betokens an unconstructive competitiveness and self-absorption. The truly modest don’t frame their activity in terms of rank, and are unlikely to see themselves as taking credit that is rightfully their due.

The person with the virtue of modesty does not perceive the world in terms of credit, nor would she be inclined to enjoy her superiority. Credit-seeking and credit-taking are of a piece. The modest person distances herself from both because she recognizes the human tendency to illegitimately judge people, as people, based on their accomplishments. On the moral perspective view of modesty, a person like Ann, Fran, or the Gandhi-like person, can remain modest and still demand recognition of her accomplishments, but not in order to take personal credit. The reason that Fran’s insistence that others recognize the merit of her contributions isn’t credit-seeking is that she is not looking for recognition for herself, she is looking for recognition of the work done by people like her, in order to effect needed social change. The case involves credit, but it does so as a part of a corrective practice; in this respect it is entirely unlike the Federer case. So while I have argued that claims to credit are not as uncontroversial as they are typically taken to be, that a plausible concept of credit must be in place, and that questions about how accomplishments should be recognized and by whom are open questions, I have not argued that claims to credit are entirely at odds with modesty.

Whether or not accomplished people deserve credit for their accomplishments is a matter that will not be settled here. My aim in raising the issue of credit was to show that claims about credit due to the accomplished are themselves fraught with normative presumptions that must be justified. Once it is further recognized that, given the social nature of credit giving and taking and the opportunities for inequality within the social practice itself, appeals to deserved personal credit will have little or no place in an account of modesty. To put the point less contentiously, appeals to deserved credit bear a much larger explanatory burden than has been supposed. When the rest of us get caught up in self-aggrandizing credit seeking, the virtuously modest person can recall that even her own significant achievements do not mean that she counts more, morally speaking.

**4. Modesty as a skill in moral perspective-taking**

I have argued that humility is a skill in moral perspective taking that is socially valuable given our tendency to lose perspective and to subtly (and not-so-subtly) over-value those who had achieved great things. The morally dangerous tendency to which modesty is a response, involves a blurring of distinctions in status between an accomplished person’s status in a role (tennis player, logician, etc.) and their status as a person deserving of moral recognition. All accounts of humility hold that the modest person will tend to downplay her accomplishments and will be sensitive to their impact on the self-conceptions of others. On modesty as moral perspective, this sensitivity is grounded in the modest person’s recognition of the human tendency to falsely attribute greater moral regard to persons (to assume that they count for more) on the basis of achievements that have no bearing on basic moral recognition.[[10]](#endnote-10) Because she does not draw attention to the significance of her own achievements, or under plays their significance when they are remarked upon by others, the modest person avoids making other people feel uncomfortable, inadequate, or envious. But, as I’ve argued, the value of modesty does not reside entirely in this; if it did it would be constrained by status quo presumptions and thereby reinforce unjust social rankings. The more fundamental social good of modesty is its commitment to tracking faulty assessments of persons that can lead to moral consideration being unfairly allotted.

The account of modesty I have here defended is similar, in many respects, to an egalitarian account of modesty defended by S. Stewart Braun, with the most significant difference being that where my account focuses on moral equality, his focuses on social equality, or civic standing. By way of conclusion, I will explain why I take moral equality to be the primary concern of the virtue of modesty. Braun (2017: 176-7) defines modesty as follows: ‘A modest agent is an agent that is disposed to act in a manner consistent with attempts to avoid establishing or endorsing distinctions in social or civic standing, ranking, or respect, which are applicable to herself, both at an institutional level and at a local community level’. Both accounts understand the modest person to be guided in his interactions with others by a commitment to equality (social or moral). But Braun unpacks the egalitarian commitment as a commitment to equal social standing, whereas on the moral perspective view of modesty, the egalitarian commitment is unpacked more broadly as a concern with illegitimate hierarchical rankings influenced by our tendency to be impressed by accomplished persons.

Braun argues that modesty concerns civil society and a commitment to social standing as equals. He holds that the focus of modesty is ‘at the level of civil society, not at the level of human value and moral equality’ (2017: 178). Moral equality is less robust than social equality, he asserts, noting that moral equality is consistent with severe economic injustice but social equality is not. Braun argues that moral equality is insufficient for modesty because it is consistent with demanding special treatment based on one’s accomplishments. An accomplished person could, he thinks, hold that all persons are morally equal and without inconsistency expect a higher social status because of his accomplishments. A commitment to moral equality, he claims, is not sufficient to prevent boasting and leveraging for social gain. One can believe in moral equality and yet seek recognition and social status. Braun seems to have in mind a very thin and theoretical conception of having a commitment to moral equality. I do not.

It should be clear that the modesty as a moral perspective view here advanced explicitly rules out demands for deference, boasting, and leveraging for social gain as consistent with a commitment to moral equality. To be thus committed, is to be committed to according each person the respect that is their due in virtue of their personhood. Opportunities for modesty (and immodesty) typically arise in the give and take of social interaction. To suppose that one deserves, say, a place in the front of the line because of one’s eminence as a logician or tennis player, or a greater say than one’s peers in a group decision unrelated to one’s expertise, is to fail in one’s commitment to moral equality. Moral equality - valuing persons as persons, independent of their accomplishments - is a value that is exercised in a social context, and so of necessity it requires attention to the individuals in, and dynamics of, that context. To value moral equality is to be able to see and respond to the humanity in all persons, irrespective of their accomplishments or lack of accomplishments. Hence, a plausible conception of a commitment to moral equality does not allow for immodest behavior.

Moreover, the focus on moral equality is necessary if we are to take seriously the concerns I have raised about unjust forms of social privilege and in-crowd advantages. Braun’s move to articulate modesty in terms of civil society is problematic because appeals to equal social standing cannot make sense of cases like Ann and Jan. Ann’s relationship with her sister is not best understood as part of civil society - it is an interpersonal relationship. The difficult waters she navigates cannot be properly characterized as involving a concern for equal social standing; Ann is trying to be responsive to her sister’s competitive nature without patronizing her, without appearing false or superficial, and without falling into problematic self-abnegation. Modesty also concerns the interpersonal, moral domain.

In conclusion, I have argued that modesty is an excellence in maintaining an appropriately egalitarian moral perspective; it is an achievement given our tendencies to be impressed with ourselves and others, given significant accomplishments. Hence the virtuously modest person will be largely indifferent to how others’ evaluate her for her accomplishments and won’t be inclined to seek credit or to suppose that it is her due. It is the commitment to fair distribution of basic moral recognition, and a skillful response to unjust social hierarchies at odds with this fair distribution, that we value in the virtuously modest person.

1. Stewart Braun (2017) argues for an account of modesty grounded in a commitment to equal social, not moral, standing. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For example, Braun (2017) argues that humility is more strongly associated with deference and servility than is modesty, and denies that they can be used interchangeably. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (1993) also advances an egalitarian account, arguing that the modest person evaluates her fundamental human worth as equal to that of others. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Irene McMullin (2010), for example, argues that modesty is an appropriate mode of self-awareness based in a recognition of how one is experienced by others, along with a desire to alleviate any discomfort others might feel as a result. It is a kind of self-understanding that is nonetheless other-regarding. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In claiming this, I am disagreeing with Sinha (2012: 261) who argues that the private and public dimensions are ‘logically distinct and practically independent’. Roughly, Sinha takes the public dimension to relate to a concern for the feelings of others which makes it independent of the modest person’s private attitudes about herself. In Section Three I will argue against this conception of the public dimension. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Garcia’s (2006) account of humility focuses primarily on the agent’s mental states about herself and her accomplishments, rather than her outward comportment. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Driver (1989) further argues that there is a class of virtues that require ignorance, and thus poses a problem for the commonly held view that moral excellence includes epistemic excellence. Flanagan’s (1990) rebuttal poses clear problems for Driver’s view. He goes on to claim that modesty is not grounded in under-estimation, but rather by the absence of over-estimation of self-worth. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Nicolas Bommarito (2013) argues that neither ignorance of one’s good properties, nor an accurate assessment of them is necessary for modesty. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sinha (2012: 260) writes: ‘people plausibly display humility when, for the right reasons, they override their ego-driven impulses to feel good about themselves wherever they can reasonably expect those impulses to conflict with various duties’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Daniel Statman (1992) makes a similar point when he argues that the modest person is able to clearly distinguish between a legitimately high self-assessment, and a recognition that as a moral being he does not consequently merit a higher moral status.

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