Nietzsche on humility and modesty

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**Abstract:**

Beginning with the *Untimely Meditations* (1873) and continuing until his final writings of 1888-9, Nietzsche refers to humility (*Demuth* or a cognate) in fifty-two passages and to modesty (*Bescheidenheit* or a cognate) in one hundred and four passages, yet there are only four passages that refer to both terms. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, he often speaks positively of modesty, especially in epistemic contexts. These curious facts might be expected to lead scholars to explore what Nietzsche thinks of humility and modesty, but to date there have been no systematic analyses of Nietzsche’s reflections on these dispositions. In this chapter, I fill that gap in the literature using semantic network analysis and systematically-guided close-reading. In so doing, I show that Nietzsche sharply distinguished between humility and modesty, considering the former a vice (for certain types of people in certain contexts) and the latter a virtue (again, for certain types of people in certain contexts).

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, humility, modesty, digital humanities, contempt, epistemology

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**1. Introduction**

Beginning with the *Untimely Meditations* (1873) and continuing until his final writings of 1888-9, Nietzsche refers to humility (*Demuth* or a cognate) in fifty-two passages and to modesty (*Bescheidenheit* or a cognate) in one hundred and four passages, yet there are only four passages that refer to both terms. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, he often speaks positively of modesty, especially in epistemic contexts.

These facts might be expected to lead scholars to explore what Nietzsche thinks of humility and modesty, but to date there have been no systematic analyses of Nietzsche’s approach to these dispositions.

A search of philpapers.org on 10 August 2020 for both ‘Nietzsche’ and ‘humility’ turned up only ten entries, one co-authored by me. Of the remaining nine, only two deal with both Nietzsche and humility at any length. First, McInerney (2016) is a theological apology for Augustine’s conception of humility. It addresses Nietzsche as an opponent for half a chapter with little sensitivity to the text. It is also published with a predatory press (Pickwick). Second, Golden (2019) is published in a peer-reviewed philosophy journal and does addresses both Nietzsche and humility throughout. However, it does not quote a single passage in which Nietzsche uses *Demuth* or one of its cognates, making the interpretation offered highly suspect.

Likewise, a search of philpapers.org on 14 August 2020 for both ‘Nietzsche’ and ‘modesty’ turned up just three entries, only two of which deal with Nietzsche’s attitude towards modesty. First, Standish (2014) does not quote a single passage from Nietzsche’s writings, relying instead for his interpretation on Derrida’s *Spurs* (1979). Second, Ansell-Pearson (2011) focuses on the role of modesty in the free spirit works, especially *Daybreak*. He argues that “Nietzsche’s thinking is best conceived […] as a philosophy of modesty,” both in “the kind of work it sets out to do” and in “the goals it sets for its readers.” Ansell-Pearson cites several of the passages that I review below, and our interpretations of these passages are largely congruent. However, Ansell-Pearson’s aims are somewhat different from mine. He wants to show how Nietzsche’s ethical reflection is constrained and directed by his commitment to modesty in *Daybreak* and the other free spirit works. By contrast, I aim to give a comprehensive account of Nietzsche’s understanding of humility and modesty themselves throughout his philosophical career.

As this rather dismal literature review shows, there is a gaping hole in the Nietzsche studies literature when it comes to humility and modesty, with just one serious paper addressing just one of these dispositions in just one period of Nietzsche’s writings. In this chapter, I fill that gap using semantic network analysis and systematically-guided close-reading. In so doing, I show that Nietzsche sharply distinguished between humility and modesty, considering the former a vice (for certain types of people in certain contexts) and the other a virtue (again, for certain types of people in certain contexts).

Here is the plan for this chapter: in section 2, I employ a digital humanities approach to graph the semantic network surrounding ‘humility’ (*Demuth*) and ‘modesty’ (*Bescheidenheit*) in Nietzsche’s corpus. Next, in section 3, I show that Nietzsche distinguished between these dispositions both on descriptive and on evaluative grounds. Whereas he almost never speaks well of humility, he often praises and self-attributes modesty. This may come as a surprise to casual readers of Nietzsche and experts alike, so I situate his endorsement of modesty in the context of his broader moral psychology, especially his virtue epistemology. I conclude with a brief summary in which I point to directions for future research.

**2. A semantic network of ‘humility’ (*Demuth*) and ‘modesty’ (*Bescheidenheit*) in Nietzsche’s corpus**

In this section, I employ the digital humanities methodology pioneered in Alfano (2019) and Alfano & Cheong (2019) to explore the semantic network surrounding ‘humility’ (*Demuth*) and ‘modesty’ (*Bescheidenheit*) in the corpus of Nietzsche’s published and authorized works. While these may not be perfect one-to-one translations from the German, using consistent translations helps to make clear that Nietzsche sharply distinguishes between these terms and the concepts they express. In particular, I operationalize humility as the union of all hits returned by the Nietzsche Source ([www.nietzschesource.org](http://www.nietzschesource.org)) for the union of ‘*demut*\*’ and ‘*demüt*\*’, and I operationalize modesty as all hits returned for ‘*bescheid*\*’. The asterisks indicate wildcard searches that return hits for any terms that begin with the character string before the asterisk (e.g., *demüthig, demuthigt, Demüthigung*). Operationalizations for the other terms are given in chapter 2 of Alfano (2019, chapter 2).

This generates an adjacency table, which, using the magic of matrix algebra, can be transformed into a co-occurrence matrix that indicates, for each pair of constructs, how frequently words that express them co-occur in the same passage in Nietzsche’s writings. One powerful way to shed light on what someone means by a word is to see which *other* words they tend to use with it. While the co-occurrence matrix represents this mathematical structure, it can be hard — especially for humanists with no mathematical training, to read and interpret. For that reason, I represent it here as a semantic network graph (Figure 1).

A picture containing small, dark, large, boat

Description automatically generated

**Figure 1:** semantic network of the moral psychological constructs surrounding humility (*Demuth*) and modesty (*Bescheidenheit*) in Nietzsche’s published and authorized writings. This graph is built not from the whole corpus but rather only from the passages in which at least one of the two constructs of interest crops up.

In this graph, each node represents a construct of interest. Each edge or connector between a pair of nodes represents their co-occurrence. Edge width represents frequency of co-occurrence (commonly called edge *weight*). A node’s size represents the sum of the weights of each of its edges (commonly called a node’s *weighted degree*). Some constructs tend to occur in clusters, such that if construct X and term Y are both present, then construct Z is likely also to be present. These clusters can be detected using an algorithm for *modularity*. Node color indicates modularity, in the sense that nodes with the same color tend to co-occur with one another and not with nodes of a different color.

As Figure 1 indicates, humility (in dark grey) and modesty (in off-white) anchor two different modules. Indeed, they co-occur in just four passages. Whereas modesty is associated in this corpus with virtue, value, instinct, conscience, nobility, and responsibility, humility is associated with a wide range of other concepts, including vice, resentment, shame and guilt. This should lead us to expect that Nietzsche conceives of humility as a vice and modesty as a virtue. However, this distant-reading approach (Moretti 2013), while suggestive, only takes us so far. It tells us what constructs we should expect — as a default hypothesis — to be relevant to our interpretation of Nietzsche on humility and modesty. In order to test that hypothesis, we need to close-read all of the passages in which the relevant terms appear and place them in the larger context of Nietzsche’s philosophy. In the next section, that is exactly what I do.

**3. Nietzsche’s differing perspectives on humility and modesty**

In this section, I show that Nietzsche categorically rejects humility (*Demuth*) as a vice but is surprisingly positive about modesty (*Bescheidenheit*), which he considers a virtue. I begin with humility, then explore the positive aspects of modesty. For Nietzsche, an instinct or other drive constitutes a virtue when it promotes what he calls ‘life’ or ‘health’, is integrated with the rest of the agents drives, and does not lead to emotional rejection of fixed aspects of the self (Alfano 2019). By contrast, an instinct or other drive counts constitutes a vice when it systematically violates these criteria, either by undermining life and health, by clashing violently with the agent’s other drives, or by disposing the agent to hate fixed aspects of herself. Since different people have different constellations of drives, which Nietzsche associates with each person’s type, this means that Nietzsche holds a person-type-relative-unity-of-virtue thesis (Alfano 2015).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**3.1. Nietzsche’s rejection of humility**

As early as the first book of *Human, All-too-human*, we find Nietzsche casting aspersions on humility. For instance, in HH 1.137, he argues that some people take “real delight in oppressing themselves with excessive claims and afterwards idolizing this tyrannically demanding something in their soul.” He characterizes this relatively early manifestation of what he would come to call the ascetic ideal with a metaphor: “Thus a man climbs on dangerous paths in the highest mountains so as to laugh mockingly at his fears and trembling knees; thus a philosopher adheres to views of asceticism, humility [*Demuth*], and holiness in the light of which his own image becomes extremely ugly.” While Nietzsche often employs metaphors involving altitude (e.g., mountains, soaring birds) in a positive way, it’s clear in this passage that he is intimating that humility is deeply problematic. The ascetic’s will to power is characterized as driving him to overcome something, anything. In the absence of any other object to tyrannize, he ends up tyrannizing himself, a phenomenon that Nietzsche explores at greater length in the second and third essays of the *Genealogy of Morals*. Such self-tyranny sets the agent’s own drives against one another and leads them to reject fixed aspects of themselves, making it a vice.

A few sections later, Nietzsche clarifies his negative assessment of humility, suggesting both that in Christian ascetics it leads to “the ruination of their health” and to a misleading impression on others: ascetics “appear to the non-saints as half incomprehensible, supernatural beings.” Ostentatious self-flagellation and other displays like Simeon Stylites’s living atop a pilar in the wilderness impress and intimidate through their bizarreness and extremity, a theme that Nietzsche develops at greater length in the third essay of the *Genealogy*. In so doing, though, they lead the ascetic to take pride in his own overweening humility: “The rise and fall of the scales called pride [*Hochmuth*] and humility [*Demuth*] entertained their brooding heads just as well as did the alternation of desire and repose of soul.” This paradoxical display of bad faith is one reason why Nietzsche rejects humility, for it is evidence that the agent’s drives are clashing with one another.

The paradoxicality of humility comes in for further criticism in HH 1.624. Nietzsche begins on a positive note, saying that, “Everyone has his good days when he discovers his higher self; and true humanity demands that everyone be evaluated only in the light of this condition and not in that of his working-day unfreedom and servitude.” The suggestion here is similar to his claim that groups should not be evaluated by looking to their averages but to their “highest specimens” (HH 9). What you are is not your mean, your median, or your mode, but your maximum — the best things of which you’re capable and have demonstrated that capability. “But,” Nietzsche laments, “men themselves traffic in various ways with this higher self of theirs and are often actors of themselves, inasmuch as they afterwards continually imitate that which they are in those moments. Many live in awe and humility [*Demuth*] before their ideal and would like to deny it.” Since people are not always at their best, they are liable frequently to judge fixed aspects of themselves harshly, even by their own standards. Instead of being proud of their best moments and achievements, they cower in the face of their own excellence.

Turning next to *Daybreak,* in D 30, Nietzsche argues that many virtues are expressions of a drive to distinction. People try to distinguish themselves, he argues, as superior to others on some dimension valued by their community. Humility, kindness to animals, artistry, and chastity are all interpreted as “variations” on the “theme” of aiming to incite envy in others, but, says Nietzsche, this aim is not always consciously available to those who manage to distinguish themselves in this way. Again, the paradoxical nature of humility is on display here: ostentatious humility aims to incite envy in others. But as humility is traditionally conceived, especially in the Christian tradition, the humble person does not make efforts calculated to inspire envy. An agent who embodies this drive is thus in a psychological disequilibrium. A few sections later, in D 38, Nietzsche suggests that what passes for “the pleasant feeling of *humility* [Demuth]” in a Christian cultural context is identical to the drive that “evolves into the painful feeling of *cowardice*” in other cultures. This is because Christian humility misleadingly represents itself not as weakness or passivity but as an expression of free will, as the second essay of the *Genealogy* explores in more detail. Summing up the paradoxicality of humility in D 417 with an allusion to Tertulian, Nietzsche says, “Many have no doubt attained to that humility [*Demuth*] which says: *credo quia absurdum est* [I believe because it is absurd] and sacrificed their reason to it: but, so far as I know, no one has yet attained to that humility [*Demuth*] which says: *credo quia absurdus sum* [I believe because I am absurd], though it is only one step further.”

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche returns to the theme that humility is paradoxical and absurd. In Z Priests, Zarathustra declaims to his followers:

Here are priests, and though they are my enemies, go quietly past them with sleeping swords.

Among them too there are heroes; many of them suffered too much, so they want to make others suffer.

They are evil enemies: nothing is more vengeful than their humility [*Demuth*].

The implication is, once again, that what is presented as humility is actually another drive that is incompatible with humility as it is commonly understood. A genuinely humble person would not exact surreptitious revenge on his enemies, but the priests do precisely that. This means that the priests’ vengeful drives would likely not be reflectively endorsed even by the priests themselves were they to rise to consciousness. People who embody such drives are thus prone to intense negative self-evaluations, making these drives vicious.

Turning next to Nietzsche’s mature works, consider first *Beyond Good and Evil* 260, which introduces the distinction between slave morality and master morality, Nietzsche argues that in slave morality,

qualities that serve to alleviate existence for suffering people are pulled out and flooded with light: pity, the obliging, helpful hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility [*Demuth*], and friendliness receive full honors here —, since these are the most useful qualities and practically the only way of holding up under the pressure of existence.

This description might seem to be consistent with humility’s being a virtue, at least for certain types of people who find themselves at the bottom of a social hierarchy. However, in GM 1.14, Nietzsche goes into further detail about the origins of humility. In this section, a character that he calls “Mr. Rash and Curious” ventures into the workshop where values are made and reports back:

There is a soft, wary, malignant muttering and whispering coming from all the corners and nooks. It seems to me someone is lying [….] Weakness is being lied into something *meritorious* […] and impotence which does not requite into ‘goodness of heart’; anxious lowliness into ‘humility [*Demuth*]’, subjection to those one hates into ‘obedience’.

The problem with the humility of slave morality is once again associated with its paradoxicality. In this way of thinking, anxious lowliness is misleadingly represented as a voluntary exercise of humility, about which the agent may even be proud. The same criticism also crops up in GM 3.22, where Nietzsche says, “In the New [Testament…] I find nothing but petty sectarianism, mere rococo of the soul, mere involutions, nooks, queer things, the air of the conventicle, not to forget an occasional whiff of bucolic mawkishness that belongs to the epoch [….] Humility [*Demuth*] and self-importance cheek-by-jowl.” If someone merely were lowly and acknowledged their lowliness, it would seem, Nietzsche would not take issue with calling that disposition a virtue. What he criticizes in *Christian* humility (which is mostly what he means when he uses the word ‘*Demuth*’) is the fact that it tends to be accompanied by a pride with which it is evaluatively inconsistent, which wrecks the psychic economy of the humble person.

In the late works, Nietzsche continues to criticize humility. For instance, in TI Arrows 31, he says, “A worm will twist back on itself when it is stepped on. This is shrewd. It lessens the chance of being stepped on again. In the language of morality: *humility* [Demuth].” Nietzsche here acknowledges that backing down and backing away when one is guaranteed to lose a confrontation may be prudent. But translating that prudence into the language of morality and treating it as merciful forbearance that one can be proud of once again triggers the paradox described above. And in *Antichrist* 8, Nietzsche alludes to the vows popularized by Francis of Assisi, saying that, “humility [*Demuth*], chastity, poverty (in a word: *holiness*)” have done “life unspeakably more harm than any vices or horrors every have.”

The one passage I was able to find in which Nietzsche demonstrates a mixed rather than negative opinion of humility is GM 3.8. Here, Nietzsche distinguishes between cases in which poverty, humility [*Demuth*], and chastity are ‘virtues’ (in derisive scare quotes) and cases in which they are “the most appropriate and natural conditions of [their bearers’] *best* existence, their *fairest* fruitfulness.” In the latter cases, the “dominating instinct” of the agent is a kind of “spirituality” which rules over instincts and others drives that express themselves via pride, sensuality, and liberality. The humility he seems to have in mind in these cases is not the paradoxical humility of someone who wants to impress others with ostentatious displays of self-flagellation and self-abnegation, but rather someone who is so laser-focused on values other than social approval that he does not care whether others think poorly of him. The former desperately seeks social approbation for humility whereas the latter comes across as humble because he has better things to do than seek social approbation. The former embodies drives that are disposed to clash with one another and to lead to disapproval of fixed aspects of the self, whereas the latter embodies drives that are unified and do not lead to such disapproval, which makes them virtues.

**3.2. The epistemic value of modesty**

As the previous section showed, Nietzsche rejects Christian humility as a vice because it tends to wreck the agent’s psychic economy and undermine their life and health. This might lead us to expect that he would have little tolerance for modesty, which intuitively seems closely related to humility. However, as early as *Human, All-too-human* and as late as *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche associates modesty with his own philosophical methodology and way of thinking. He treats it as a positive feature of inquiry — a feature lacked by much of the philosophizing that proceeded him.

In Alfano (2013; see also Alfano 2019, chapters 6 & 7), I argue that Nietzsche is best understood as a responsibilist virtue epistemologist whose primary virtues are curiosity and intellectual courage. While I still think he places most emphasis on these virtues, I now see that I should have also included modesty among the intellectual virtues that Nietzsche celebrates — especially in and for those who share his type.

The closest thing in the contemporary virtue epistemology literature to modest inquiry as I sketch in this section is the disposition typically called “intellectual humility.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The fact that this literature uses ‘humility’ rather than ‘modesty’, while Nietzsche uses ‘humility’ to refer to a very different disposition, may lead to confusion. In addition, Nietzschean modesty differs from intellectual humility as it has been theorized in recent years in at least one very important way: the stage of inquiry it governs. In the contemporary literature, intellectual humility is typically thought to involve unbiased processing of evidence (related to open-mindedness), lack of concern for social standing that might impede someone from admitting they were wrong, and other dispositions that function in the midst of an already-begun inquiry. Nietzschean modesty, by contrast, gets to work earlier — before the agent has begun their inquiry. In particular, as we will see in more detail below, modesty involves asking only questions that can be answered using rigorous and reliable methods. [[3]](#footnote-3) For these reasons and because of the constraints imposed by word count, I do not further engage with the contemporary literature in this chapter.

Let’s begin with HH 1.2, in which Nietzsche recommends philosophizing modestly: “everything has become: there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths. Consequently what is needed from now on is *historical philosophizing*, and with it the virtue of modesty [*Bescheidung*].” Far from endorsing global skepticism, Nietzsche here makes it clear that truths can be established, but that such truths are not grand metaphysical propositions (e.g., the cosmological argument) or metaethical injunctions (e.g., the categorical imperative). Instead, they are empirical characterizations of local conditions during certain historical periods. We lack the tools to establish the grandiose claims that philosophers have typically sought out, yet we do possess the tools to examine piecemeal parts of the empirical world and should, Nietzsche thinks, be satisfied with such modest inquiries.

In the next section (HH 1.3), Nietzsche continues this line of argument:

It is the mark of a higher culture to value the little unpretentious truths which have been discovered by means of rigorous method more highly than the errors handed down by metaphysical and artistic ages and men, which blind us and make us happy. At first the former are regarded with scorn, as though the two things could not possibly be accorded equal rights: they stand there so modest [*bescheiden*], simple, sober, so apparently discouraging, while the latter are so fair, splendid, intoxicating, perhaps indeed enrapturing.

Once again, Nietzsche recommends “modest” and “unpretentious truths” that can be investigated with “rigorous” methods. One might think that by calling grand metaphysical claims “errors,” Nietzsche undermines his own position. Calling them errors suggests that they are false, and that Nietzsche knows that they are false. However, another way of understanding talk of “errors” in this context is that Nietzsche thinks we should not draw conclusions for which we lack adequate evidence; he thinks that we are in no position, from the point of view of rigorous methodology, to draw any grand metaphysical conclusions. In other words, these conclusions are errors not necessarily because they are false (though they may well be false) but because we are in no way justified in believing them. In the remainder of this section, we will see many further examples of this sort of criticism of *a priori,* metaphysical, and metaethical philosophizing.

Next, in HH 1.37, Nietzsche argues that “what is required” of philosophers and other thinkers now is “that perseverance in labor that does not weary of heaping stone upon stone, brick upon brick, what is required is the abstemious courage not to be ashamed of such modest [*bescheidenen*] labor.” As above, Nietzsche associates modesty with a way of inquiring and thinking that recognizes its limits and aims to do rigorous work within those limits rather than setting of on flights of fancy. Later, Nietzsche suggests that a person who strives “towards a higher human culture” must be someone who “welcomes everything new and developing, takes pleasure in the honors and successes of others and makes no claim to be in the sole possession of the truth but is full of a modest [*bescheidenen*] mistrust.” In this case, modesty relates not only to a way of thinking or inquiring within constraints but also to the *social* dimensions of inquiry. A modest thinker recognizes that other people may know things that he doesn’t, and rather than being upset or embarrassed by that fact treats it as an opportunity to learn.[[4]](#footnote-4) Finally, in HH 1.635, Nietzsche raises a cautionary flag about genius, saying that insofar as “genius of every kind maintains the fire of its convictions and awakens distrust of the cautious and modest [*bescheidenen*] sense of science, it is an enemy of truth.” Genius here presumably refers to the grandiose philosophizing described above that aims to establish *a priori*, necessary truths in the domains of metaphysics and metaethics. Nietzsche warns us that, while it may be inspiring, such ambition is unconstrained by the more rigorous, self-critical, empirical methodologies that promise to lead to evidence that we can rely upon.

Turning next to *The Wanderer and his Shadow,* which Nietzsche appended to *Human, All-too-human* in 1880, two years after its initial publication, we find Nietzsche pre-occupied with what he calls in several passages the “smallest” and “closest things,” as opposed to the “first and last things.” The former are associated with rigorous, local, historicized empirical inquiry, while the latter are associated with unrigorous, global, ahistorical, *a priori* philosophizing. In other words, the “smallest” and “closest things” are associated with the modest style of inquiry described above, whereas the “first and last things” are associated with an immodest style of inquiry endemic among philosophers. For instance, in WS.6, Nietzsche remarks that hitherto, understanding has been

*employed in the wrong direction* and *artificially diverted* away from these smallest and closest things. Priests and teachers […] hammer even into children that what matters is something quite different: the salvation of the soul, the service of the state, the advancement of science, or the accumulation of reputation and possessions.

Likewise, in WS.16, Nietzsche laments, “Nothing could be more wrongheaded than to want to wait and see what science will one day determine once and for all concerning the first and last things and until then continue to think (and especially to believe!) in the *customary* fashion.” Instead, he argues, “We must again become *good neighbors to the closest things* and cease from gazing so contemptuously past them at clouds and monsters of the night.” Finally, towards the end of *The Wanderer and his Shadow* (HH WS.310), Nietzsche offers two practical and epistemological principles. According to the first principle, “life should be ordered on the basis of what is most certain and most demonstrable, not as hitherto on that of what is most remote, indefinite and no more than a cloud on the horizon.” According to the second principle, “the *order of succession* of what is closest and most immediate, less close and less immediate, certain and less certain, should be firmly established before one orders one’s life and gives it a definitive direction.” These passages suggest that it might be fair to call Nietzsche a *methodology first* epistemologist, or that he uses *rigor heuristic* in selecting his questions. Instead of starting with a question or topic that is interesting, fascinating, or inspiring and then trying to answer it with whatever methods are available — regardless of their rigor — he starts by determining which available methods are most reliable, then asking questions that can be answered using those methods.

Turning next to *Daybreak*, we again find Nietzsche emphasizing the epistemic aspects of modesty. In D 194, he says, “The slightness of the success which the teachers of morality have had on the whole is to be explained by the fact that they wanted too much at one time; that is to say, that they were too ambitious: they were all too anxious to offer prescriptions *for everybody*.” As before, Nietzsche contrasts previous philosophers whose ambitions outstripped their methodological prowess with his own approach, which aims to offer prescriptions not for everyone all at once but only for those few to whom they are suited in dribs and drabs, as the evidence comes in.

Later in *Daybreak*, Nietzsche returns to the theme mentioned at the end of the previous section that there is a disposition that may be interpreted as humility or modesty but is actually an expression of the fact that the agent in question has better or more important things to concern themselves with than social approval. In D 482, which is entitled “*Seeking one’s company*,” he asks:

Are we then seeking too much if we seek the company of men who […] expect little from life, and would rather take this as a gift than as something they have earned, as though the birds and the bees had brought it to them? Who are too proud ever to be able to feel themselves rewarded? And are too serious in their passion for knowledge and for honesty to have time or inclination for fame? — Such men we should call philosophers and they themselves will always find a more modest [*bescheideneren*] name.”

Unlike most of the passages canvassed above, where modesty is a feature of the process of inquiry, this passage associates modesty with the inquirer. For this reason, I think it is fair to say that Nietzsche thinks there is an epistemic virtue of modesty, which expresses itself both in the sorts of questions one asks and pursues (namely, ones that can be answered using rigorous methods) and in one’s social relationships (namely, by both being and coming across as unconcerned for social status because one is more concerned for epistemic goods than for social status).

Turning next to *The Gay Science*, we find several passages that again commend modesty as an epistemically responsible way of thinking and inquiring. For instance, in GS 186, Nietzsche says that the phrase “‘science of morals’ is much too arrogant and offends *good* taste, which always tends to prefer more modest [*bescheideneren*] terms. We should,” he goes on,

admit to ourselves with all due severity exactly *what* will be necessary for a long time to come and *what* is provisionally correct, namely: collecting material, formulating concepts, and putting into order the tremendous realm of tender value feelings and value distinctions that live, grow, reproduce, and are destroyed, — and, perhaps, attempting to illustrate the recurring and more frequent shapes of this living crystallization, — all of which would be a preparation for a typology of morals. Of course, people have not generally been this modest [*bescheiden*].

As before, modesty is associated with directing one’s inquiry to local, historical, empirical matters rather than attempting to draw global, sweeping, *a priori*, and necessary generalizations. It involves rigorous and painstaking investigations of the patterns of similarity and variation in these local empirical truths, using the best available methods. And it is tentative, in the sense that it does not aim to establish truths once and for all but rather to establish best guesses given the available evidence. Nietzsche continues this theme of tentativeness in GS 344, saying that, “In science [*Wissenschaft*], convictions have no right to citizenship […]: only when they decide to step down to the modesty [*Bescheidenheit*] of a hypothesis, a tentative experimental standpoint, a regulative fiction, may they be granted admission and even a certain value in the realm of knowledge.”

As those familiar with the German scholarly tradition will know, *Wissenschaft* covers not just the natural sciences but also the human sciences and even the humanities. So when Nietzsche says that science is tentative, he means to endorse epistemic modesty in philosophy as well. Indeed, just a few passages later in GS 351, he cheekily points out that it was “*modesty* [Bescheidenheit] that in Greece coined the word ‘philosopher’ and left the extraordinary insolence of calling oneself wise to the actors of the spirit — the modesty [*Bescheidenheit*] of such monsters of pride and conceit as Pythagoras, as Plato.” On the one hand, Nietzsche is no doubt right to accuse Plato of being prideful and conceited, but on the other hand, he is also right that there is something modest about calling oneself a *lover of* wisdom (a philosopher) rather than simply and already wise (a sophist). Later still, in BGE 224, which is located in the “Our Virtues” chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche again insists that modesty is a virtue, at least for those of his own type: “We men of ‘historical sense,’ we do have our virtues — this cannot be denied. We are unassuming, selfless, modest [*bescheiden*], brave, full of self-overcoming, full of dedication, very grateful, very patient, very accommodating.”

The final work in which modesty plays an important role is *The Antichrist*. As we saw in the previous section, this book excoriates humility. However, it simultaneously lauds modesty. For example, in A 13, Nietzsche indicates that people who share his type (what he calls “men of ‘historical sense’” in BGE 224) are misunderstood by others. “Our objectives, our practices, our silent, cautious, distrustful nature — all of this seemed totally unworthy and despicable.” Instead of the careful inquiry that Nietzsche advocates and practices, he suggests, “people demanded a *picturesque* effect from the truth, they demanded that the knower make a striking impression on their senses. Our *modesty* [Bescheidenheit] is what offended their taste for the longest time.”

In the next section, he goes on, insisting on a very deep form of historicization, namely animalization of the human: “We have become more modest [*bescheidner*] in every way. We have stopped deriving humanity from ‘spirit’, from ‘divinity’, we have stuck human beings back among the animals.” In A 38, Nietzsche continues this line of thinking, saying that “there are no words left for what used to be called ‘truth’, we cannot stand to hear priests even mention the word ‘truth’ any more.” This is not because ‘truth’ is meaningless or relative, but because what in earlier days was called the ‘truth’ were the first and last things that Nietzsche has given up investigating in favor of the smallest and closest things, as he calls them in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*. He goes on: “These days anyone with even the most modest [*bescheidensten*] claim to honesty *has* to know that every sentence pronounced by a theologian, a priest, a pope, is not only wrong, it is a *lie*.” Next, in an allusion to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, in which teleological and theological explanations for natural phenomena come in for well-deserved mockery, Nietzsche quips, “It would take only the tiniest bit of modesty [*bescheidenste*] to see that a God who cures our cold at just the right moment or who tells us to climb into the coach just when it starts to rain is so absurd that we would have to get rid of him even if he *did* exist” (A 52).

Finally, in A 53 Nietzsche derides the epistemic weight placed on the deeds and words of martyrs: “The idea that *martyrs* prove anything about the truth of a matter is so far from being true that I would like to deny that martyrs have ever had anything to do with the truth.” Traditionally, martyrs have been seen as a distinct class of epistemic sources. How, one might ask, would they be willing to give up their lives if they were not absolutely firm in their faith, if they were not *knowers* of God? Nietzsche recognizes the pull of this argument, but he likens martyrs to ascetics as characterized above: they are putting on a show. As he says, “A martyr throws his truth claims in the world’s face in a tone that shows so little intellectual integrity and expresses such a *stupor* in the face of the question of truth that you never have to refute a martyr.” Martyrs come across as and perhaps even believe themselves to be knowers with *special, mystical access* to divine truths. This is exactly the same sort of epistemic immodesty that Nietzsche rejects in metaphysics and metaethics, the same over-ambitious attempt to arrive, all at once, at knowledge of the first and last things. Yet, says Nietzsche, “Truth is not something that one person might have and another not; at best, peasants or their apostles like Luther might think about truth this way. You can be sure that modesty [*Bescheidenheit*], *moderation* [Bescheidung] in this matter increases in proportion to the degree of conscientiousness in spiritual things.”

**4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I used a systematically-guided close reading to explore what humility [*Demuth*] and modesty [*Bescheidenheit*] mean to Nietzsche. Humility is a vice that undermines life and health, in addition to leading to clashes among the agent’s drives and liability to disapprobation of fixed aspects of the self. By contrast, modesty, at least in those who share Nietzsche’s own constellation of drives that includes curiosity, intellectual courage, and honesty, is a virtue that aids inquiry by directing the agent to ask only questions that can be answered using rigorous methods. The quite different ways in which Nietzsche uses these terms and their cognates show that he is not simply confused or contradicting himself when it comes to humility and modesty. Rather, he systematically employs these terms to pick out different dispositions — dispositions that concern him from his early writings of the 1870s all the way up until 1889.

I have not covered in detail every one of the nearly two hundred passages in which Nietzsche uses these terms, preferring instead to curate a set of quotations that best illustrate his thinking. In future research, the remainder of the passages could be explored in more detail. One opportunity for future research, in particular is what appears to be a secondary usage of modesty in the corpus that relates not to epistemology but to social and cultural hierarchy. Relevant passages include HH 1.395, 1.588, HH 2.383, GS 21, and BGE 221; I hope that some enterprising Nietzsche scholar may see it fit to follow up on this lead.

I would like to conclude with a methodological reflection on the state of Nietzsche studies and indeed much of the history of philosophy. In this chapter, I aimed to demonstrate by example the sort of painstaking, detail-oriented, empirical inquiry that Nietzschean modesty recommends. I conducted a thorough literature review and was able to find just one solitary paper that approached Nietzsche on modesty in a serious way. Another paper (Standish 2014) is nearly 15,000 words long and yet breathtakingly neglects to cite a single passage from Nietzsche’s corpus. While I am obviously in no position to insist that all historians of philosophy or even all Nietzsche scholars adopt my methodology that combines distant-reading semantic network analysis with systematic close-reading, I do implore my colleagues to think more seriously and soberly about their methods. In the same way that it is overly ambitious to jump to universal and eternal conclusions based solely on *a priori* arguments, so it is overly ambitious, one might say immodest, to base one’s interpretation of Nietzsche or any other figure in the history of philosophy on a handful of cherry-picked passages — let alone no passages at all.

**References:**

**List of abbreviations of Nietzsche’s works and translations**

A *The Antichrist*

BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*

D *Daybreak*

GM *On the Genealogy of Morals*

GS *The Gay Science*

HH *Human, All-too-human*

TI *Twilight of the Idols*

Z *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

I use the following translations of Nietzsche’s works, with occasional minor edits and corrections:

Nietzsche, F. (1986). *Human, All Too Human*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1997). *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Edited by M. Clark & B. Leiter. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge University Press.

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1. A related proposal by Katsafanas has to do with unified selfhood rather than the unity of virtue: Katsafanas argues that, for Nietzsche, an agent’s self is unified when the agent acts on their values and wouldn’t disapprove of that action were she to learn more about the etiology (though not necessarily the consequences) of her motives (2016). We can connect these accounts by saying that an agent who is *disposed* by her drives to engage in such actions enjoys virtuous drives, whereas an agent who is disposed by her drives to engage in action that violates the unified selfhood criterion has at least one vice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, among many others, Alfano et al. (2017), Christen et al. (2017), Gordon & Carter (2017), Haggard et al. (2018), Hazlett (2012), Krumrei-Mancuso & Rouse (2015), Leary et al. (2017), Roberts & Wood (2007), Samuelson et a. (2015), Tanesini et al. (2020), and Whitcomb et al. (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the importance of selecting good questions, see Watson (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on this idea and its association both with Nietzsche’s perspectivism and with the division of epistemic labor, see Alfano (2017 & 2019 chapter 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)