MODESTY, ASYMMETRY, AND HYPOCRISY

Hans Maes

early draft – not for citation

In recent years, numerous philosophers have begun to show interest in modesty as a virtue. Julia Driver, Owen Flanagan, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, Daniel Statman, A.T. Nuyen, G.F. Schueler, all have participated in the debate, each proposing a different account of what modesty is and why modesty is a virtue. Surprisingly, however, none of these accounts ultimately proves very satisfying. None of the authors, I shall argue, actually succeeds in articulating the necessary and sufficient conditions for modesty (section 1). Furthermore, and even more surprisingly, none of the authors takes into account what is presumably the most essential and certainly the most intriguing characteristic of modesty (section 2). My main aim is to shed some light on this characteristic, showing that it is less enigmatic and also less problematic than may seem at first sight. In this respect, the analogy with the practice of giving presents will be very revealing (section 3 and 4). Even though my analysis will not provide all the necessary and sufficient conditions for modesty, it will hopefully show why Bernard Williams is right in pointing out the 'notorious truth that a modest person does not act under the title of modesty' and why, on the other hand, Alan Bennett is wrong in supposing that 'all modesty is false modesty' (section 5).

1. A SURVEY

There are at least five competing accounts of modesty. In what follows I shall briefly present each one of them and point out, first, which definition of modesty is advocated, and second,

why this definition might be incorrect. All current theories, I hope to show by means of simple counterexamples, fail to spell out the necessary and sufficient conditions for modesty.

a) *The underestimation account of modesty*. According to Julia Driver, 'the modest person underestimates his self-worth. […] This entails that the modest person is ignorant, to a certain degree, with regard to his own self-worth.'[1] This analysis appears untenable. A person 'disposed to underestimate self-worth to some limited extent, even in spite of the available evidence,'[2] is not necessarily modest. Suppose for instance that the greatest philosopher in the world constantly underestimated himself as a result of his incapacity to judge the abilities of his colleagues. If this man were to tell his students: 'I may not be the greatest philosopher in the world but I am an incredibly gifted thinker, so next time I enter the classroom I expect applause,' he would be underestimating himself. Nevertheless, most students would not exactly consider him a modest person. By contrast, a modest person does not necessarily underestimate himself. Imagine a philosophy student writing an article and winning a prize for it. The members of the jury, the members of the press, the other contenders, all would congratulate him and assure him that his was by far the best article. In this case it is almost impossible for this student not to know that he wrote the best article. Yet it is not impossible that he would nevertheless stay modest with respect to his accomplishment.[3] Hence, underestimation seems neither sufficient nor necessary for modesty.

b) *The nonoverestimation account of modesty*. According to Owen Flanagan, 'the modest person may well have a perfectly accurate sense of her accomplishments and worth but she does not overestimate them.'[4] Keeping a perfectly accurate sense of oneself, however, is not an easy matter. In fact, numerous experiments in cognitive social psychology have shown that 'most people dramatically overestimate themselves across a wide variety of situations.'[5] Consequently, Flanagan claims: 'what we need is not more people who underestimate their self-worth, but more people who do not overestimate their worth and

accomplishments.'[6] Those people are admirable. Those people we call modest. A very similar account, only this time with regard to humility[7], is advocated by Norvin Richards. Humility, says Richards, 'involves having an accurate sense of oneself, sufficiently firm to resist pressures […] to think *too much* of oneself […].'[8] So Richards and Flanagan basically support the same conclusion, though they reach it independently of each other. Still, their analysis does not sound very plausible. What to say, for instance, about this example: 'No, I do not consider myself a star or a hero. My book has been bought by a million people but even if it were bought by the whole world, I would still not call myself a hero. That would be an insult to real heroes, people who risk their lives to save the lives of others.' Most of us would agree that this is the answer of a modest man, even if statistics would show that he only sold half a million copies. So a modest person does not always have an accurate sense of his accomplishments. Likewise, someone with an accurate sense of his own accomplishments is not always modest. Suppose for instance that all critics agree that X has written a brilliant book and that he is one of the greatest philosophers in the world. Thus, if X himself declared: 'I am one of the greatest philosophers in the world and my book is really brilliant' he would not be overestimating himself. Nonetheless, such a declaration would be regarded as extremely immodest. Nonoverestimation, one may therefore conclude, is neither necessary nor sufficient for modesty.

c) *The egalitarian account of modesty.* Proponents of this view are Aaron Ben-Ze'ev and Daniel Statman. According to Ben-Ze'ev, modesty requires 'a realization of the fundamentally similar worth of all human beings, and the evaluation of this similarity as more significant than the differences resulting from the accomplishments of different human beings.'[9] The modest person '*evaluates* his or her fundamental human worth as similar to that of other people; in this sense the agent is a type of *egalitarian*.'[10] According to Statman, 'modesty has a cognitive as well as an ethical aspect. The cognitive aspect is the (true) belief

in the ultimate equality of human beings as "ends in themselves", or, to put it more concretely, in their having the same moral rights. The ethical aspect is the disposition to stick, so to speak, to this belief and to behave accordingly […].'[11] The modest person avoids arrogance and boastfulness because he always keeps 'a clear distinction between his superior qualities and achievements, on the one hand, and his moral status with regard to other human beings, on the other.'[12] This view on modesty, however, can be refuted. For if one agrees that it is highly improbable that members of Amnesty International are always modest or that non-egalitarian racists are never modest, then one must also agree that Statman and Ben-Ze'ev have not succeeded in identifying 'the core meaning of the psychological attitude of modesty'[13]. From this it follows that egalitarianism is neither sufficient nor necessary for modesty.

d) *The equity account of modesty.* Equity or 'epieikeia' is defined by Aristotle as a 'correction of law when it is defective owing to its universality' (1137b). For instance, when considering the particular circumstances of crime, a judge may refrain from punishing a criminal in full. This judge who is equitable is more just, says Aristotle, than someone who is strictly just. According to A.T. Nuyen, '[t]o be modest is to be equitable with respect to one's own achievements.'[14] Like a judge taking mitigating circumstances into account, one tends to refrain from praising oneself when one considers the particular circumstances of one's achievements. For almost invariably 'the particular circumstances will have a deflationary effect on one's accomplishment'[15] because 'an achievement is almost invariably not entirely due to one's own effort.'[16] So, according to Nuyen, to be modest is to be equitable and to be equitable means 'to be active in examining the circumstances of a particular achievement […].'[17] This account is not very convincing. Indeed, suppose one were to read the following in an interview: 'Without my parents, without my former teachers or without some amount of luck I would never have become what I am now: the most learned, the most brilliant and the

most admired philosopher in the world.' Apparently a person active in examining the circumstances of a particular achievement is not necessarily modest. Conversely, a modest person does not necessarily have to be active in examining the circumstances of his achievement. Suppose a famous philosopher is suddenly struck by complete amnesia, as a result of which he does not remember anything about the particular circumstances of all his achievements. This man could still be a modest person. When asked for instance how it feels to be a hero, he could answer: 'I do not think it is fitting to call me a hero. There are undoubtedly people who are more deserving of this title; people who risk their lives for the sake of others.' Hence, equity is neither sufficient nor necessary for modesty.

e) *The indifference account of modesty.* According to G.F. Schueler, 'modesty at least involves (1) having, and being aware of having, genuine accomplishments while (2) not caring whether people evaluate one highly because of these accomplishments.'[18] In other words, a modest person always exhibits an 'indifference to how she is regarded for her accomplishments […].'[19] This account has its flaws too. Being modest is not necessarily the same as being indifferent to how one is regarded for one's accomplishments. There is no reason whatsoever to suppose that a person who is glad to receive a compliment or applause is *ipso facto* an immodest person.[20] I would even say the opposite is true. People who are completely indifferent to applause or compliments are often extremely immodest. An example: 'I do not care what you or anyone else thinks of me as a philosopher. I just know that I am brilliant and that I am one of the most important authors writing today, anywhere in the world.' From this, one can only conclude that indifference is neither necessary nor sufficient for modesty.[21]

2. ASYMMETRY

This short critical survey started with a discussion of Julia Driver's account since she is the author of the seminal article on modesty, to which all other authors refer, if only with the explicit aim of criticizing it. There are indeed a number of objections to her particular way of defining modesty. For instance, I have shown that underestimation is neither necessary nor sufficient for modesty. Consequently, she does not offer an adequate answer to the question 'What is modesty?'. Yet this is not the only and not even the most important objection to be forwarded. According to most participants in the debate, the real problem with Driver's account is that it is unable to provide a satisfying answer to another question: 'Why is modesty a virtue?'. Why do people *admire* modesty? This is very hard to explain for Driver because she thinks modesty consists in a lack of self-knowledge and, as everybody knows, a lack of self-knowledge is usually *not* admired. How can Driver explain that modesty is laudable if she reduces modesty to ignorance; a more deplorable than laudable attribute?

Since this is generally considered to be the most problematic aspect of Driver's account, other authors seem make sure not to fall prey to the same objection. Flanagan, Ben-Ze'ev, Statman, Nuyen and Schueler are all able to explain why modesty is appreciated. And they are able to do this because in the end they all equate modesty with some kind of accurate self-knowledge. A modest person does not, as Julia Driver maintains, possess less self-knowledge than other people. A modest person possesses *more* self-knowledge. According to these authors, it is not the modest person who *under*estimates himself but the immodest person who *over*estimates himself. That is why, according to these authors, immodesty is bad and modesty is good. And that is why not only Flanagan (and Richards) but also the others can be seen as advocates of an 'accuracy or nonoverestimation account of modesty'. One could say, for instance, that, according to Ben-Ze'ev and Statman, someone is modest if he does not overestimate his own moral status. On the other hand, according to Nuyen, someone is modest if he does not overestimate his own role in the realization of his accomplishments.

This opinion is, in a sense, shared by Schueler, for Schueler gives the following answer to the question why modesty (i.e. indifference to how one is regarded for one's accomplishments) is a virtue: 'modesty is admirable because of what it tells about the person who has this trait. Such a person, one might say, has taken to heart what is at least very arguably her true place in the scheme of things. […] if someone knew enough about how one came to produce some accomplishment […], none of the essential explanatory factors would be things for which one could fairly claim any credit. All would be things totally outside one's control.'[22]

Flanagan, Ben-Ze'ev, Statman, Nuyen and Schueler, however, are also faced with a number of difficulties, some of which I have already explicated in the separate evaluation of their accounts. But now I wish to take this a step further. What I would like to argue is that what initially seemed advantageous in these accounts, reveals itself to be a disadvantage. The fact, namely, that they equate modesty with an accurate self-image - while allowing them to explain the admirability of modesty - ensures only that an essential characteristic of modesty is missed.

Essential to modesty is a certain self-other asymmetry: an asymmetry between what others can say or think about a person and what that person can say or think about himself. In my discussion of Flanagan's view, I have already given an unambiguous example. Even if all critics agree that X has written a brilliant book and that he is one of the greatest philosophers in the world, X cannot say something like that about himself. He cannot do this though he would not be overestimating himself (if all critics reach the same verdict, one may assume that it is an accurate verdict). Thus, Flanagan's nonoverestimation view cannot account for this asymmetrical structure, and neither can the other authors, because, as shown above, they defend the same fundamental view. Take for instance Schueler and Nuyen. Suppose that after a lecture a philosopher says to himself: 'Now I deserve a standing ovation because my lecture tonight really had everything: marvellous reasoning, inspirational ideas, delivered with superb

style.' Schueler and Nuyen would explain the immodesty of such a thought in the following way: this man does not know his 'true place in the scheme of things', for his accomplishments are not only due to his own effort; they would have been impossible without the continuing support of his family, the stimulating lectures of his former professors or the zealous work of his assistants; if one owes so much to others, 'then the desire to be given credit for one's accomplishments […] will be a desire for something one does not deserve.'[23] That is why it is improper for this man to think that he deserves a standing ovation. According to Schueler and Nuyen, this is a crude overestimation of his own merit. But if this were correct, it would be just as improper for *other* people to think or say that he deserves a standing ovation because that too would be an overestimation of his merit. In other words, if Schueler and Nuyen are right, the statement 'you deserve a standing ovation' should be just as inappropriate as the statement 'I deserve a standing ovation'. Yet this is clearly not the case. On the contrary, the proper thing to do when someone gives a great lecture is to give him a warm applause. Completely improper would be a response like: 'You do not deserve applause because you owe so much to your family, your professors and your assistants.'[24]

What these examples illustrate is that the same utterance can be proper or improper depending on who utters it; or, as already stated, that an asymmetry exists between what other people can say or think about a person and what that person can say or think about himself.

The authors I referred to ignore this asymmetry since they all interpret modesty as some sort of correct self-knowledge. The reason for their insistance on this, as I have already suggested, is that, in contrast to Julia Driver, they want to be able to justify why modesty is a virtue or why it is admirable. Some even point this out as their principal concern (cf. the title of Schueler's essay[25]). This is something to be wondered about. I do not think, for instance, that this concern can be found to the same extent in research on other virtues. Of course, there is plenty of discussion about the general question of what makes a trait a moral virtue or what

exactly makes a virtue admirable but in the research on particular virtues the problem of justification seldom arises. For example, philosophers rarely focus on the question of whether or why it is virtuous to be benevolent or grateful. This is not a deep philosophical concern, perhaps because in everyday life it is not a deep concern either.[26] It really goes without saying that gratitude and benevolence are admirable. Nobody seems to doubt this fact or need arguments in support of it.

By contrast, the question regarding the virtuousness of modesty *is* a real philosophical concern. Maybe this is because it is also a real concern in everyday life? Indeed, the question whether or why modesty is a virtue does sometimes arise in ordinary life. And precisely the asymmetrical structure of modesty appears to be responsible. It is this structure that seems problematic at first sight and that makes people frequently question the virtuousness of modesty. An example will make this clear. Even if critics agree that X is a brilliant philosopher, X cannot say this himself. He cannot even confirm their judgement ('Yes, it is true. I am brilliant.') for reasons of modesty. But is modesty such a good thing then, if it prohibits an accurate self-assessment? Can we still consider it a virtue, if it forces people to abandon something as valuable as self-knowledge? If it forbids people to tell the truth about themselves, can we still call it admirable? Must we not concede that it sometimes comes very close to hypocrisy?

All this goes to show that doubts about the virtuousness of modesty arise almost spontaneously as one starts to consider its intriguing asymmetrical structure. So it is presumably this structure that makes modesty as a virtue much less evident than benevolence or gratitude. And it is probably this structure that also gives rise to the philosophical question 'Why is modesty a virtue?'. Thus, every indication exists that the authors who are concerned to prove that modesty is admirable, ignore the very characteristic indirectly giving rise to their

concern. By grounding modesty in an accurate self-image, they disregard its most problematic yet most essential aspect: its underlying asymmetrical structure.

If one really wants to understand what modesty is, one first has to clarify this asymmetry, which is what I intend to do next. Note that I shall not try to spell out all of the necessary and sufficient conditions for modesty. My ambition is more moderate (since it is always better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong). What I shall try to show is that the asymmetrical structure of modesty is not as strange and not as problematic as might seem at first sight. That is, I shall try to show that modesty is not unreasonable and not necessarily conducive to hypocrisy. Admittedly, some examples suggest the opposite conclusion. But I hope to demonstrate that this conclusion is unfounded and that it is possible to find some rationality in the seemingly irrational, asymmetrical structure of modesty.

The best way to accomplish this is by making a short detour via a context in which a similar asymmetrical structure seems to operate.

3. GIVING / RECEIVING A PRESENT

Presenting a gift differs considerably from performing a duty and from conducting a transaction.

Transaction and gift are mutually exclusive. When, for instance, a shop-assistant sells you a book, he will never say ‘this is a gift from me to you’. That would be absurd. For selling a book means asking money in return, whereas ‘consider it a gift’ exactly means ‘I do not need anything in return’ or ‘you owe me nothing for that’. Here, by the way, lies one of the reasons why people often ‘minimize’ their gifts (‘don’t mention it’; ‘it was nothing’). People seem to do this in order to point out that you are not in the red with them.

In like manner, duty and gift are mutually exclusive. When, for instance, someone brings back the book he borrowed from you, he will not present this as a gift. That would be nonsensical because you have every right to that book and he is simply bound by the duty to return. 'This is a gift' always seems to presuppose 'I do not have to give this to you'. So giving a gift is always optional. Performing a duty or respecting a right, on the other hand, is never optional. This is one of the reasons why there can never be a duty to give a gift or a right to receive one. 'A gift,' says David Heyd in his authoritative book on supererogation, 'is, by definition, something which no one has a right to be given.'[27] Therefore we can say that the receiver of a gift always gets more than what he is (strictly speaking) entitled to and the giver always does more than what is (strictly speaking) his duty.

When someone gives a book, without being compelled to do so and without asking for something in return, we call this a nice gesture. (The same does not hold for someone who borrows a book and subsequently returns it nor for someone who sells a book.) And, as everybody knows, gratitude is the appropriate reaction to a nice gesture. (By contrast, one does not have to be especially grateful to a shop-assistant nor to someone who just brings back the things he borrowed.) Hence, a fundamental difference exists between the logic of the gift on the one hand, and the logic of duty or the logic of the market on the other. But also within the logic of the gift, it might be argued, there is an important difference to be found. For there seems to be a notable distinction between, for instance, giving books to schools in the Third World and giving books to a friend on his birthday. The former is an example of a gift (in the narrow sense), whereas the latter is an example of what I would call a present. The distinction might be articulated in the following way: while a gift or a favour is primarily meant to help somebody, a present is first and foremost a token of personal appreciation, that is, a token of friendship, love, gratitude. Of course, it is possible to grant somebody a favour or give somebody a gift out of friendship, love or gratitude, but these are not *sine qua nons*

(just think of the donation of blood, described by Titmuss as an 'anonymous gift-relationship'). And of course, a present can come in handy, yet this is not an absolute requirement (think of all the utterly 'useless' presents and gadgets one can find in gift shops).[28]

What *is* absolutely required for a present, is personal appreciation. Without that, a present loses its value as a present. For instance, if I were to find out that someone had given me a birthday present out of pity ('He didn't get any presents, the poor thing'), I would probably not be very happy. A present must come 'from the heart', otherwise a present can no longer be regarded as a present. For this reason people generally avoid asking for a present because they do not want to be given one merely *because* they asked for it. As a rule, genuine appreciation comes spontaneously and consequently a genuine present should also be given spontaneously (this might explain why 'surprise' has become a synonym for 'present').

Moreover, asking for a present is problematic in itself. For in asking for a present, you are actually saying: 'please, appreciate me.' Such a request seems improper because appreciation simply cannot be given upon request. Help, on the other hand, can be given upon request, which is why asking for a gift or a favour is not problematic in itself.

A genuine present can also never be enforced since genuine appreciation can never be enforced. If I learn, for instance, that someone had given me a birthday present only because he was forced to do so, I would probably refuse this present. And I suppose I would do the same thing, if someone were to come up to me and say: 'I don't really want to give you this present but I think it is my duty, so here you are.' In this respect too there is a striking difference between gift and present. For, if someone were to say 'I don't really want to give something to those schools in the Third World but I think it is my duty, so …' that would not incur the same disapproval.[29] All this goes to show, once more, that the receiving of a present

can never be considered a right. For a right must always, by definition, be enforceable, whereas a present is never, by definition, enforceable.

Imagine the following situation. G ('Giver') has an important meeting scheduled for the evening but she cannot find a baby-sitter. She therefore turns to her neighbour R ('Receiver') and asks her whether she would mind taking care of the children for a couple of hours. R is willing to do this even though she had other plans for the evening. At the meeting G tells her colleague O ('Outsider') about this nice gesture, to which O replies: 'Maybe you should give R a small present.' G agrees, but when she comes home after some time and starts talking with her neighbour, R herself says: 'Maybe you should give me a small present now.' G thinks this is highly inappropriate. When she tells O the story afterwards, O fully agrees.

Why is R's reaction inappropriate? There are several possible reasons. One of them might be that R's nice gesture suddenly becomes much less nice due to her asking something in return. For giving someone a present or doing someone a favour[30] ranks as a kind gesture precisely because nothing is asked in return (cf. supra). Precisely because nothing is asked in return, one has the strong impression that the giver does not only think of himself but is concerned about the happiness of someone else too. By asking for a present in return, however, R reveals her selfishness. After making a 'noble gesture' she starts thinking of herself again and thereby shows her greed.

Another reason for disapproval might be that R is apparently unconcerned about whether the present she gets really springs from sincere appreciation. For, if she were concerned about this, she would probably not have asked for a present (cf. supra).

But undoubtedly the most prominent reason why G and O disapprove of R's statement, is that they consider it presumptuous. The *OED* defines 'presumption' as 'seizure and occupation without right; usurpation' and 'the taking upon oneself of more than is warranted by one's position, right, or (formerly) ability'. Is it true that R seizes something without right?

Is she taking upon herself more than is warranted by her position or right? Indeed, she is taking upon herself a present, something to which one is *never* entitled (cf.supra). This point is also stressed by David Heyd (though he unfortunately does not make a distinction between gift and present): 'by […] giving a gift the benefactor does something to which the beneficiary has no right. He may deserve it, but still not have any *claim* to it.'[31] R does claim a present. That is why her statement is so presumptuous. Moreover, R takes it for granted that G will give her a present, thereby completely ignoring that G would actually do more than her duty if she gave R a present. R would not see this as a nice gesture and she would probably not be very thankful either. Needless to say that this too would be a reason for disapproval. As a matter of fact, according to the *OED*, another meaning of 'presumption' is 'the assuming or taking of something for granted'.

This somewhat elaborate argumentation might explain why R's reaction is inappropriate. What is more, it might also explain why exactly the same reaction from O ('Maybe you should give R a small present.') is *not* inappropriate. For it seems that all the reproaches we heap on R, do not apply to O. First of all, we cannot say that O's reaction makes her original gesture less nice (because there was no gesture from her side). Secondly, one cannot say that O is unconcerned about whether the present she gets really springs from a sincere appreciation (because she does not receive a present at all). Thirdly and most importantly, O's statement is not presumptuous because she is not taking upon herself anything at all. Contrary to R, she is not claiming a present. (Moreover, O cannot be accused of ingratitude, since, if she does not receive a present, she does not have to be grateful either.)

So within the practice of giving presents too there appears to be a marked asymmetry: O can say something about R that R cannot say about herself. Furthermore, there seems to be a rational explanation for this asymmetry. This certainly puts a new perspective on the asymmetrical structure typical of modesty.

4. PAYING / RECEIVING A COMPLIMENT

The wrong thing to say when one receives a compliment is: 'I know' or 'That is useful information'. The right thing to say is of course: 'Thank you very much'. One is expected to be grateful for a compliment in much the same manner as for a present. In fact, a compliment bears likeness to a present in various ways. Just as a present is an expression of personal appreciation (friendship, love, …), a compliment is an expression of acknowledgement or admiration. And just as a present is worthless without any genuine appreciation, a compliment is worthless without any sincere admiration or acknowledgement. For instance, if I find out that someone has complimented me, not because he really admires my work, but only because he wants to make me happy, that would surely not make me happy. This is one of the reasons why people usually do not ask for a compliment or show that they desire one. People avoid this since they do not want to be given a compliment merely *because* they desire one or *because* they asked for one.[32] A compliment must be given spontaneously. One cannot exact a compliment since one cannot exact acknowledgement or admiration (just as one cannot exact friendship or love). And because one cannot be forced to admire someone else, one cannot be forced to pay someone a (genuine) compliment either. If this is the case, there is no point in speaking of a right to compliments (cf. supra).

Imagine the following situation. *O*, a journalist, is of the opinion that *R* is the most eminent Kant-scholar in the world as well as a brilliant writer. *G*, a fellow journalist, fully agrees. One day, *G* is given the opportunity to interview *R*. But even before he can pay *R* a compliment, *R* himself pushes off: 'I am a brilliant philosopher and without a doubt the greatest Kant-scholar in the world.' *G* thinks this is highly inappropriate. When *O* reads the interview afterwards, he holds the same view.

Why do *G* and *O* consider *R*'s reaction inappropriate? In view of the striking analogy, or better, homology[33] between compliment and present, one may suspect that the disapproval of *R*'s reaction is based on the same grounds as the disapproval of R's reaction. Indeed, a comparable reasoning may be constructed, at least regarding the most important argument.[34] For it is plain that *R* too is acting presumptuously. *R* too appropriates something to which he has no right. In particular, he appropriates the compliment which others might pay him. He just takes it upon himself and this is without right as one is never (strictly speaking) entitled to a compliment.[35] 'He may deserve it, but still not have any claim to it.' Moreover, if *G* were to give him the compliment, *R* would probably have taken that fully for granted. He would not have seen it as a nice compliment and would not have been very grateful either. This too would be a reason for calling *R*'s behaviour presumptuous. Presumptuous or … immodest: the *OED* defines modesty precisely as 'freedom from presumption' (and in almost every dictionary of synonyms 'presumption' and 'modesty' are listed as antonyms).

R's statement is inappropriate and immodest. By contrast, *O*'s statement, bearing exactly the same content ('*R* is the most eminent Kant-scholar in the world and a brilliant writer'), is perfectly acceptable. In the light of what has been said, this is no longer mysterious. Unlike *R*, *O* is not seizing or occupying something without right. He is not appropriating a compliment. Accordingly, presumption is out of the question.

Thus, like the practice of giving presents, the practice of giving compliments is grafted onto an asymmetry: *O* can pay *R* a compliment in all honesty and sincerity but *R* cannot take this compliment upon himself. *This asymmetrical structure lies at the root of modesty.* Modest people respect this asymmetrical structure. Immodest people violate it.

Despite its categorical formulation, this description must not be taken as a definition. A sound definition of modesty would entail all necessary and sufficient conditions and this is manifestly not the case. On the one hand, the description is too broad: some compliments

actually can be appropriated (e.g. ‘This is one of the best essays I have ever written’). On the other hand, it is too narrow: there are other forms of recognition, besides compliments, that cannot be appropriated either (e.g. applause). In short, the proposed characterisation still leaves a good deal unexplained. Nevertheless, one must also concede that numerous subtle distinctions can be accounted for now. For instance, while it is immodest to say ‘I am a brilliant philosopher’, it sounds much less immodest to say ‘I may be a brilliant philosopher but as a father and a husband I am a complete failure.’ The analysis I proposed might explain why. For, while it is undoubtedly flattering to hear others say ‘You are a brilliant philosopher’, it is much less so to hear them say ‘You may be a brilliant philosopher but as a father and a husband you are a complete failure.’ This is not a compliment. Hence, someone who says this of himself cannot be seen as someone who is appropriating a compliment. The difference between the (immodest) statement ‘I am by far the best snooker player in history’ and the (hardly immodest) statement ‘I won the World Snooker Championship’ can be clarified in the same manner.

What might also be explained now, is why there is something wrong with saying (to yourself or to others): ‘I am a very modest person’. Somehow this seems self-defeating. A very modest person will normally not glorify or proclaim his modesty. Or as Bernard Williams puts it: ‘it is a notorious truth that a modest person does not act under the title of modesty.’[36] Why is this so?

Someone who is acting under the title of modesty, i.e. saying or thinking ‘I am a very modest person’, is appropriating a compliment (for if other people were to say ‘you are a very modest person’, this would be a nice compliment). Yet appropriating a compliment, in my view, is the distinctive characteristic of *im*modesty. So by saying or thinking ‘I am a very modest person’ one actually provides evidence to the contrary. Hence the notorious truth that a modest person will not proclaim his modesty.

Bernard Williams' remark does not present a problem for my analysis but it does present difficulties for the various accuracy accounts of modesty since none of them seems able to offer an alternative and satisfactory explanation. In fact, the weakness of these accounts is revealed best of all by Williams' observation. For if the accuracy accounts are correct - if modesty always presupposes a perfectly accurate sense of oneself - then a truly modest person should always think and say of himself that he is modest. This is completely counterintuitive.

5. HYPOCRISY

'To pretend' can mean both 'to make believe' and 'to lay claim to'. Although it is often thought that modesty has to do with the first of these meanings (Alan Bennett: 'All modesty is false modesty, otherwise it wouldn't be modesty'), I disagree. Modesty must actually be associated with the second of these meanings. A modest person does not pretend ('make believe') to be someone else *viz*. someone less gifted or accomplished than he really is. Rather, a modest person does not pretend ('lay claim to') the compliments of other people. After all, that would be pretentious.

Suppose that *R*, the Kant-scholar, suddenly comes to realize that he has always been far too immodest. And suppose that this awareness makes him change his attitude completely and turns him into an exemplarily modest man. What would interviews with this modest *R* then look like? Presumably *R* would not call himself brilliant anymore. Neither would he declare himself the greatest Kant-scholar in the world. However, this does not mean that from now on *R* has to picture himself as just an average philosopher or that he has to deny that he is an eminent Kant-expert. That is not what modesty is about.[37] *R*'s answer to the question whether he is the greatest Kant-expert in the world could now be, for instance: 'That is for others to

decide, not for me' or 'That is something I can't pass judgement on.'[38] In saying this, he is not pretending to be someone else. Rather, he acknowledges that he cannot say certain things about himself. In other words, he literally acknowledges the asymmetrical structure typical of modesty.

Suppose, however, that *R* would maintain that his accomplishments are not that important. Suppose that he would say (as modest people frequently do): 'It's nothing really.' At least that would be hypocrisy? Everybody (including *R*) knows that his talents and achievements are great. So at least in this case it seems we have to agree with Schopenhauer (who, by the way, called himself a genius): 'What then is modesty but hypocritical humility, by means of which, in a world swelling with base envy, a man seeks pardon for excellences and merits from those who have none?'[39]

Indeed, it is possible that *R* is only feigning humility. But it is also possible, I think, that *R* is not feigning anything.[40] So I contest Schopenhauer's far too broad generalization. First of all, *R* can seriously and honestly maintain that his accomplishments are not that important. For everything is a matter of perspective. If *R*, for example, thinks of what really matters to him (his wife and children, being healthy, …) or if he considers his accomplishments 'sub specie aeternitatis', these could seem futile to him. As Robert Nozick points out: 'For anything we prize, it seems we always can conceive a context wide enough so that the thing appears insignificant'.[41] Thus, it is wrong to assume that *R*'s statement must be a hypocritical falsehood, just as it is wrong to assume that his statement can best be interpreted as a strategy to avoid envy or seek pardon. The way that *R* and modest people in general put things in perspective can be explained otherwise, I believe. Once more the comparison with presents may be instructive. As already noted, people often 'minimize' their presents. It is a way of stressing that no debt whatsoever exists. Only on that condition can a present really be a present. But also interesting is that only on that condition will others be really able to *return* a

present. For a present is valuable only if it is given spontaneously, 'from the heart'; not if it is given out of a sense of obligation. Therefore, when one emphasizes that one's present is 'nothing' ('de rien', 'di niente', 'de nada', 'het is niets'), one releases the other from the obligation to give in return. The other is completely free, so that if he finally decides to give something in return, this too will be a real and valuable present. As Claude Lefort remarks: 'one does not give in order to receive; one gives so that the other will give'.[42] I think we have to understand the modest person's 'It was nothing' in exactly the same way. When he says that his accomplishments are not that important, he is releasing others from the obligation to pay him a compliment. They are completely free, so that if they do decide to pay a compliment, this will be a real and sincere compliment. Again, this has nothing to do with hypocrisy but everything with the awareness that one cannot lay any claim to the compliments of another person.

Besides, if people somehow suspect that hypocrisy is involved, they speak of *false* modesty. And this indirectly confirms the existence of real modesty (*pace* Bennett). After all, one can only make false money by forging real money.[43]

---

[1] Julia Driver, 'The Virtues of Ignorance,' *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 373-84, p. 376.

[2] Julia Driver, 'Modesty and Ignorance,' *Ethics* 109 (1999): 827-834, p. 830.

In this recent article, Driver adds some further qualifications ('to some limited extent'; 'even in spite of the available evidence') in answer to G.F. Schueler's critical remarks.

[3] For instance, instead of denying all the compliments (to himself or to others), he could perfectly well *accept* those praises with gratitude and humility. (See also footnote 20 and 37.)

[4] Owen Flanagan, 'Virtue and Ignorance,' *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 420-28, p. 424.

[5] Flanagan, pp. 426-27.

David Hume already knew this: 'Men have, in general, a much greater propensity to overvalue themselves;' (*Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning The Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], p. 264.) Note that this observation calls into question the widely accepted view that depressed people have too negative a self-image. It actually seems to be the other way around: 'Depressed

subjects have an accurate idea of how other people perceive them, whereas nondepressives exaggerate the impressions they make on others.' This is one of the findings of a survey article by two of the originators of "depressive realism" theory, Lauren Alloy and Lyn Abramson. (Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind* [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999], p. 300.)

[6] Flanagan, p. 427.

[7] Sometimes, however, Richards uses the word 'modest' and not 'humble'. So for him there does not seem to be much difference between the two concepts. (Norvin Richards, 'Is Humility a Virtue?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 [1988]: 253-260, p. 257.)

[8] Richards, p. 254.

Spinoza's 'superbia', for example, can be seen as the counterpart of this virtue: 'Pride is over-estimation of oneself by reason of self-love.' (*Ethics*, trans. Andrew Boyle [London: Everyman, 1995], p. 132 [III, def.XXVIII].) The same holds for Montaigne's 'praesumption': 'another kind of "glory": the over-high opinion we conceive of our own worth.' (*Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech [London: Penguin Press]).

[9] Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, 'The Virtue of Modesty,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993): 235-246, p. 238.

[10] Ben-Ze'ev, p. 235.

[11] Daniel Statman, 'Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment,' *The Philosphical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 420-438, p. 434.

[12] Statman, p. 434.

[13] Ben-Ze'ev, p. 245.

[14] A.T. Nuyen, 'Just Modesty,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 101-109, p. 106.

[15] Nuyen, p. 106.

[16] Nuyen, p. 107.

[17] Nuyen, p. 106.

[18] G.F. Schueler, 'Why Modesty Is a Virtue,' *Ethics*, 107 (1997): 467-485, p. 479.

[19] Schueler, p. 483.

[20] In 'The Weight of Glory' C.S. Lewis observes that being pleased with a compliment 'is in fact the humblest [...] of pleasures - nay, the specific pleasure of the inferior: the pleasure of a beast before man, a child before its father, a pupil before its teacher, a creature before its Creator.' (*Screwtape Proposes a Toast and other pieces* [Glasgow: Collins, 1985], 94-110, p. 102.)

[21] This article had already been written when I learned of a new attempt to define modesty. Like previous accounts, however, this new account by Michael Ridge ('Modesty as a Virtue', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37 [2000]: 269-283) is unsuccesful in articulating the neccessary and sufficient conditions for modesty. Moreover, Ridge explicitly defends a moderate version of Schueler's account. He does not hold that modest people have to be indifferent to the esteem of others (as Schueler does) but they may certainly not care too much about it. Thus, caring little about esteem seems perfect and even 'the person who cares too little about whether she is esteemed may […] count as modest' (p. 277). This does not fit with my experience. All modest people I know actually care *a lot* about the esteem of others (see also C.S. Lewis' remark, footnote 20). What is more, I think it is precisely because they care a lot about the esteem of others that they will never claim or appropriate this esteem. In my view, *that* would be immodest (see section 4). So the important question is not how much one should care about, but rather how exactly one should deal with the esteem of other people. And this question, which is the focus of my article, is left unanswered by Ridge.

[22] G.F. Schueler, 'Why Modesty Is a Virtue,' *Ethics*, 107 (1997): 467-485, p. 484.

So, although Schueler presents his account as an affective rather than an epistemic account ('The trick is to see that modesty is (therefore) not to be explained in terms of the agent's beliefs (or the presentation of them) at all.' p.438), it appears that, in the end, his account is very epistemic after all.

[23] Schueler, p. 484.

[24] From Schueler's and Nuyen's point of view, however, this is not improper. As a matter of fact, people should always, in general, respond in this way because apparently it is a general truth that 'if someone knew enough about how one came to produce some accomplishment […], none of the essential explanatory factors would be things for which one could fairly claim any credit.' So it seems that, in their view, applause should be banned altogether from this world. This *reductio ad absurdum* proves conclusively, I think, the untenability of Schueler's and Nuyen's account.

[25] Schueler even wrote a second essay, entitled 'Why IS modesty a virtue?', in which he proposes a new answer to the question why modesty is admirable. According to this alternative account, modesty is a virtue 'because of what it reveals about the person who has it, namely, that her goals and purposes come from herself, not from others.' (*Ethics*, 109 (1999): 835-841, p. 839.) A modest person does not care about what others think of her and as such exhibits an admirable independence and autonomy. By contrast, someone who does care about what other people think of her, is dependent on those other people and this is blameworthy. It betrays 'a certain hollowness of self.' (Schueler, p. 838). So, in Schueler's view, a modest person is a model of independence. I

will try to show, however, that a modest person is quite the opposite. In my view, a modest person realizes that in some respect he always has to depend on others. More specifically, he realizes that it is always up to others to pay him a compliment and that compliments can never be appropriated. In the following sections I will try to substantiate this claim.

[26] Apart from modesty, courage also seems an exception to this rule. Philosophers have often discussed the problem whether or why courage is always a virtue (see, for example, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty's essay 'The Two Faces of Courage' in her book *Mind in Action. Essays in the Philosophy of Mind* [Boston: Beacon, 1988]). Again, I think this is mainly because these troubling questions also tend to arise in everyday life (for instance, when courage appears to serve a bad cause or when an immoral person has been found very courageous).

[27] David Heyd, *Supererogation. Its status in ethical theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 146-147.

[28] Oddly enough, the distinction between gift and present cannot be found in recent studies on this subject (e.g. *Gifts and Interests*, ed. Antoon Vandevelde [Leuven: Peeters, 2000]). Nor is it mentioned by Heyd in his book on 'supererogation' (even though this book contains an extensive analysis of the gift-giving practice).

[29] It should be noted that, strictly speaking, there is no duty to give a gift, not even when one feels personally obligated to give one. Giving a gift is always a matter of supererogation, though it need not always be perceived as such by the agent.

[30] Bearing in mind the terminological difference I introduced, the situation is this: R does G a *favour* and in return she expects a *present* from G.

[31] Heyd, p. 39.

[32] There are (at least) two more reasons why people will not show that they are longing for a compliment and why they will certainly not ask for one. First of all, asking for a compliment is problematic in itself, just as is asking for a present: someone who is asking for a compliment is actually asking for admiration and this request is always improper because admiration simply cannot be given upon request. Second, it is a well-known truth that precisely someone who is longing too much for admiration will not be admired. This is probably why, as La Bruyère remarked, 'All men in their hearts covet esteem, but carefully hide their anxiety to be esteemed.' (*Characters*, XI.65)

[33] 'Whereas analogies do not necessarily extend beyond the superficial similarities that define them, homologies, resulting from common causal mechanisms, do allow such predictive extensions.' Thus, the flippers of whales and the fins of sharks are analogous, whereas the flippers of whales and the wings of bats are homologous. (I

borrow this example and the above definition from Jon Elster's *Alchemies of the Mind* [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999], p. 239.)

[34] It is less obvious but not impossible to find parallels for the other two arguments. For instance, it seems that *R* (like R) is little concerned about whether the compliments he will receive spring from a sincere admiration. For, if he were concerned about this, he would probably not have arrogated these compliments to himself.

[35] Perhaps one could reproach the immodest Kant-scholar that he should have read Kant's *Lectures on Ethics* more carefully: 'men will repel,' says Kant, 'the presumption that claims their favourable judgment, since they want their judgment to be free and unconstrained'; and also: 'A man who lusts after honour seeks to compel the judgment of others, by demanding their esteem, and in so doing he makes himself ridiculous. He encrouches upon our rights and drives us to resist him.' (*Lectures on Ethics*, trans. L. Infield [Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett, 1963], p. 188.)

[36] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Londen: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 10.

According to Williams, this illustrates a more general point regarding virtues as 'it is rarely the case that the description that applies to the agent and to the action is the same as that in terms of which the agent chooses the action.' (p.10) Just as a modest person will not act under the title of modesty, a courageous person will typically not choose acts as being courageous or a benevolent person will not do benevolent things under the description of benevolence but rather under descriptions as 'she needs it' or 'it will stop the pain' (fairness, for instance, is one of the few exceptions to this rule). However, the case of modesty still seems somewhat special since it is the only one that really leads to a paradox. For someone who says that he is very modest obviously provides evidence to the contrary, whereas the same does not hold for people who proclaim their courage or benevolence. They do not, by that token alone, betray that they are not courageous or benevolent (only that they are not modest).

[37] A modest person does not always have to go out of his way to discount the compliments of others. For instance, a modest person will often just say 'Thank you' to a nice compliment. (This very simple example causes great difficulties for those who argue that modesty always amounts to hypocrisy or those who think that modesty and underestimation always go together.)

[38] In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Londen: Penguin, 1996) the following conversation takes place (p. 43):

'[…] But do you always write such charming long letters to her, Mr. Darcy?'

'They are generally long; but whether always charming, it is not for me to determine.'

Besides, when modest people do say something complimentary about themselves, they will often add (somewhat apologetic) 'if I may say so myself', thereby acknowledging that one may normally *not* say such things of oneself.

[39] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane & J. Kemp [London: Kegan Paul], p. 303.

[40] Likewise, I believe it is possible that *R* is not underestimating himself. Thus, this section once again shows the substantial difference between my account and Driver's since Driver would certainly interpret the phrase 'It's nothing really' as an ordinary example of underestimation.

[41] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 604.

[42] Quoted by Jacques T. Godbout, 'Homo Donator Versus Homo Oeconomicus,' in *Gifts and Interests*, ed. Antoon Vandevelde (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 23-46, p. 31. Godbout also mentions the strange gift-giving practice of 'kula' where, according to Marcel Mauss, 'one gives as if it were nothing' and 'the giver exhibits an exaggerated modesty.' (It should be noted that this whole paragraph is inspired by Godbout's illuminating article.)

[43] Furthermore, it is most likely that false money will be exposed some day if it is in circulation long enough. I think the same holds for false modesty. And just as there are special tests to check whether coins and notes are real or false, there also seem to be subtle ways of checking whether modesty is real or false.