

It's What's on the Inside that Counts... Or is It? Virtue and the Psychological Criteria of Modesty

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Abstract Philosophers who have written on modesty have largely agreed that it is a virtue, and that it therefore has an important psychological component. Mere modest behavior, it is often argued, is actually *false* modesty if it is generated by the wrong kind of mental state. The philosophical debate about modesty has largely focused on the question of which kind of mental state—cognitive, motivational, or evaluative—best captures the virtue of modesty. We therefore conducted a series of experiments to see which philosophical account matches the folk concept of modesty. Surprisingly, we found that the folk concept is primarily behavioral. This leads us to argue that modesty may not be a virtue, but that if it is none of the extant philosophical accounts have properly explained why.

1 Introduction

Is modesty a virtue? Most philosophers who have considered the question agree that it is. Irene McMullin (2010), for example, claims that modesty is virtuous because it is “other-regarding”: the modest person wants to avoid causing those with fewer accomplishments to suffer from feelings of inadequacy. Others have argued that modesty is virtuous because of its connection to justice (Ben-Ze’ev Ben-Ze’ew 1993; Brennan 2007; Nuyen 1998). The modest person, they say, is an egalitarian who understands

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that, despite her accomplishments, she is no better than anyone else. And Julia Driver (1989) treats modesty's apparently obvious status as a virtue as a reason to reject knowledge-based accounts of virtue.

Modesty scholars also agree that, because it is a virtue, it must have a psychological component. As a result, most accounts of modesty contrast it with *false* modesty, which involves seemingly modest behavior that is generated by non-virtuous psychological states. Despite outward appearances, false modesty isn't modest at all. Seemingly modest behavior might be intended to deceive, for example, in which case the behavior is just a *façade*. It might be motivated by a self-interested desire for social or reputational gain, or accompanied by smug self-satisfaction. Since such cases strike many modesty scholars as not virtuous and as therefore immodest, they standardly mark a clear distinction between modesty and false modesty, a distinction that preserves modesty's status as a virtue.

Despite their agreement that modesty is a virtue and that there must therefore be a psychological criterion that distinguishes it from false modesty, modesty theorists disagree about *what kind* of psychological criterion this might be. There have been three categories of psychological criterion proposed in the modesty literature. The first of these is *cognitive*. The scholars in this category identify modesty with particular beliefs modest agents have about their accomplishments (Driver 1989, 1999; Flanagan 1990). For example, Julia Driver argues that the truly modest person is ignorant of her worth and her accomplishments. That is, she "think[s] herself less deserving, or less worthy, than she actually is." Driver therefore argues that the virtue of modesty "rests upon an epistemic defect" (Driver 1989, 377). Such an account is plausible, she says, because "sincerity seems to be a necessary condition for genuine modesty, and the person who underestimates his self-worth is sincere in understating it" (376). For Driver, therefore, modesty requires ignorance: the person who behaves modestly but knows the value of her accomplishments is not modest at all.

The second category is *motivational*. Scholars here propose that genuinely modest behavior is generated by the right motives or desires, rather than by particular beliefs (Ridge 2000; Wilson 2014; Woodcock 2008). For example, saying something modest to help your interlocutor feel better about her own accomplishments is an instance of genuine modesty, while saying something modest simply in order to *appear* virtuous or to gain respect is false modesty, since it is motivated by self-interest. Alan Wilson's account, for example, combines a behavioral disposition "to present your accomplishments/positive attributes in a way that is sensitive to the potential negative impact on the well-being of others" with a motivational origin for that disposition out of "a concern for that well-being." False modesty, by contrast, is the combination of the behavioral disposition and the wrong kind of motive, such as "the desire for personal gain" (Wilson 2014, 78)

The third category of psychological criteria is *evaluative*. On these accounts, the truly modest person can have full knowledge of her accomplishments, so long as she does not think that those accomplishments are so important that they make her better than other people (Ben-Ze'ev Ben-Ze'ew 1993, Dixon 2005). This is because, no matter her accomplishments, no individual's worth is more than that of another. Thus, someone makes an immodest evaluation if he believes his accomplishments make him better than others. And, relatedly, one is *falsely* modest if one "communicate[s] to others that one does not believe one's success to be definitive evidence of being better

than they are, when in fact one *does* believe it” (italics in original, McMullin 2010, 789).

Some accounts combine elements of more than one of these categories. McMullin’s account, for example, includes both an evaluative and a motivational condition. Modesty is evaluative in that it is “characterized by a correct understanding of the degree to which one’s accomplishments ought to be taken as definitive of oneself” and is motivational in that “modest people communicate that self-understanding through behavior motivated by the desire to ensure that their accomplishments do not cause pain to others” (McMullin 2010, 783). So her account of modesty includes both modest behavior and two distinct but related psychological criteria. Michael Ridge’s account also combines a behavioral disposition with a psychological criterion that combines the motivational and the evaluative: the modest person’s disposition arises “partially in virtue of not caring too much about whether she is esteemed” and “partially in virtue of caring enough that people not overestimate her accomplishments” (Ridge 2000, 281).

Each of these categories of theory, then, uses a psychological criterion (either cognitive, motivational, evaluative, or a combination of these three) to draw a distinction between genuine and false modesty. This distinction is motivated by the scholars’ aims to defend modesty as a virtue. As they show, false modesty brings with it vices such as deception, condescension, and selfishness. Such vices must be kept separate from an account of a virtue.

In setting out their accounts of modesty, the theorists in each category appeal to the intuitive plausibility of treating one or another case as a clear example of modesty, and so the success of their arguments depends in part on just how intuitive those cases actually are. We therefore conducted a series of experiments designed to see how closely the competing theories of modesty actually match the folk concept of modesty. What we found was surprising. None of the psychological criteria reviewed above was successful in distinguishing modest from not-modest behavior. In this paper, we therefore challenge the idea that the folk concept of modesty includes, as a central requirement, a distinct psychological condition that can distinguish genuine from false modesty. Instead, the folk concept of modesty seems to be primarily behavioral, rather than psychological. Despite the arguments of philosophers working on modesty, most people attribute modesty to someone so long as she *says* something modest, regardless of her private assessments, motives, or beliefs about her own accomplishments. The folk concept of modesty is therefore much broader than the philosophical debate has allowed. As a result, we argue, modesty may not be a virtue at all. If it is, and there is a psychological criterion that distinguishes genuine from false modesty, none of the extant accounts of modesty is the philosophical literature have successfully identified it.

2 Experiment 1 – The Underestimation and non-overestimation Accounts

Our first experiment contrasts two different cognitive accounts of modesty: Julia Driver’s (1989) underestimation account and Owen Flanagan’s (1990) non-overestimation account. According to Driver, the modest person underestimates her accomplishments or self-worth because she is ignorant of them (Driver 1989, 374). Therefore, someone who is aware of the value of her accomplishments but publicly understates them is not modest but *falsely* modest. Flanagan, by contrast, rejects the

idea that modesty requires ignorance of one's accomplishments. Instead, he argues that the modest person can have accurate knowledge of his skills and worth so long as he does not overestimate them. Importantly, though, he does not allow an agent to incautiously announce her knowledge publicly for this can come across as bragging, which is a "disqualification" of modesty (Flanagan 1990, 423). Accordingly, for both Driver and Flanagan, modesty hinges on an internal cognitive criterion (a certain quality of knowledge).

Feltz and Cokely (2012) conducted a series of experiments testing how closely these two accounts of modesty match the folk concept. Re-testing these accounts was an obvious place for us to begin our experiments for two reasons. First, their results were surprising. Driver's view that modesty requires ignorance has been widely criticized, and virtually all other theorists have rejected it. Feltz and Cokely, however, found that participants favoured Driver's view over Flanagan's to a significant extent. Because of the contentiousness of her view, then, we thought that a double-check on its relation to the folk account was in order. Second, we noted some methodological issues with Feltz and Cokely's experiments, and we wanted to see if their results still obtained if these problems were addressed.

Taken together, Experiment 1 had four conditions (given below). Two were derived from Driver's accounts of modesty and false modesty (the Ignorant and False conditions, respectively), and one from Flanagan's non-overestimation account (which we called the Accurate condition). The fourth condition (Agree) was expected to generate very low attributions of modesty. This condition was to act as an unambiguous reference point for "not modest."

2.1 Method

Participants¹ were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (Ignorant, False, Neutral, Disagree) in a between-subjects design. All participants read a simple story, responded to three test items, then completed a brief demographic questionnaire. The basic story was about Jamie, who receives a compliment on her rollerblading skills. The different versions of the story manipulate whether Jamie knows that she is good at rollerblading and how she responds to the complement. Here is the text of the stories:

Ignorant. Jamie is a very good rollerblader, but she doesn't know that she is very good at rollerblading. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, "Thank you! But I don't think I'm very good at rollerblading."

False. Jamie is a very good rollerblader, and she knows that she is very good at rollerblading. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, "Thank you! But I don't think I'm very good at rollerblading."

¹ $N = 160$, aged 18–6 years, mean age = 31 years; 74 female; 94% reporting English as a native language. Participants were U.S. residents, recruited and tested online using Amazon Mechanical Turk and Qualtrics, and compensated \$0.35 for approximately 2 min of their time. These same recruitment and compensation procedures were used in all the experiments reported here. Repeat participation was prevented within and across experiments.

Accurate. Jamie is a very good rollerblader, and she knows that she is very good at rollerblading. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, “Thank you! It's kind of you to say so.”

Agree. Jamie is a very good rollerblader, and she knows that she is very good at rollerblading. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, “Thank you! I agree that I'm really good.”

After reading the story, participants responded to a modesty attribution:

Modesty DV. When Jamie said, “Thank you! [...],” she was being modest.

Participants then advanced to a new screen and responded to a knowledge attribution question, which we asked in order to confirm that the participants' modesty attributions were made while aware of whether or not Jamie knew about her own accomplishments. :

Knowledge DV. Jamie knows that she is a very good rollerblader.

Responses were collected on standard 7-point Likert scales, 0 (“completely disagree”) – 6 (“completely agree”), left-to-right across the participant's screen. After testing, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

2.2 Results

Preliminary regression analyses revealed that response to the dependent variables was unaffected by participant age, gender, or socioeconomic status. The same is true in all the other experiments reported in this paper. We will not discuss these demographic variables further.

A univariate analysis of variance showed that assignment to condition affected modesty attributions, $F(3, 156) = 41.12, p < .001$. (See Fig. 1.) The size of the mean difference was very large, $\eta p = .442$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons with independent samples t-tests revealed that mean modesty attribution did not differ among the Ignorant ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.25$), False ($M = 4.46, SD = 1.34$), and Accurate ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.28$) conditions, all $ps > .289$, n.s., and that it was lower in the Agree condition ($M = 1.65, SD = 1.44$): compared to Ignorant/False/Accurate, $ts(77/79/78) = -8.25/-9.09/-8.95, ps < .001$. One sample t-tests showed that mean response was below the neutral midpoint in the Agree condition but above the midpoint in the other three conditions, all $ps < .001$.

A univariate analysis of variance showed that assignment to condition affected knowledge attributions, $F(3, 156) = 40.68, p < .001$. The size of the mean difference was very large, $\eta p^2 = .439$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons with independent samples t-tests revealed that mean knowledge attribution was lower in the Ignorant condition ($M = 2.51, SD = 1.65$) than in the other three conditions: compared to False/Neutral/Agree, $ts(78/77/77) = -7.58/-6.87/-9.75, ps < .001$. Mean attribution was lower in the Neutral condition ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.21$) than in the Agree condition ($M = 5.35,$

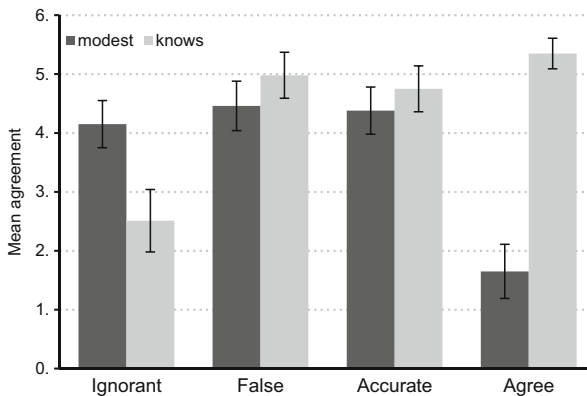


Fig. 1 Experiment 1. Mean agreement with the modesty and knowledge attributions. Scales ran 0 (CD) - 6 (CA). Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals

SD = 0.80), $t(78) = -2.61$, $p = .011$, but it did not differ between False ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.24$) and Neutral, or between False and Agree, $ps > .111$.

A paired samples t -test showed that in the Ignorant condition, mean modesty attribution was significantly higher than mean knowledge attribution, $t(38) = 5.18$, $p < .001$. The size of the mean difference was very large, $MD = 1.64$, 95% CI [1.00, 2.28], $d = 1.12$.

2.3 Discussion

This experiment tested Driver's claim that the modest person is ignorant of the value of her accomplishments. On Driver's view, cases in which a person knows the value of her accomplishments, but acts as if she does not, represent *false* modesty. Our results show that Driver's account does not capture the folk concept of modesty. We found no significant differences in attributions of modesty between the cases in which Jamie was ignorant of her skill (Ignorant) and those in which she was aware of it but responded in modest ways (False and Accurate). Moreover, participants did not offer similarly high attributions of modesty in these three conditions because they were entirely indiscriminate in their modesty attributions, since in the Agree condition, they did *not* attribute modesty.

Importantly, as was indicated by participant attributions of knowledge, the high modesty attributions in the False condition obtained despite respondents being aware that Jamie was misrepresenting her knowledge of her accomplishments. For Driver, False represents a clear case of *false* modesty, but modesty attributions were high and there was no significant difference between modesty attributions in False and Ignorant. Given the data from this experiment, we conclude that if the folk concept includes a distinction between genuine and false modesty, it is not a distinction that depends on whether or not the putatively modest person is aware of the value of her accomplishments.

The findings from our experiment appear to conflict with the surprising results from Feltz and Cokely's (2012). Whereas their results showed that participants thought the character in the Ignorant condition was significantly more modest than the character in

either the Accurate or False conditions, our experiment showed no such result. Our participants thought the characters in these three vignettes were similarly modest. So while their findings seem to support Driver's ignorance account, ours seem to undermine it.

At least two factors could explain this apparent conflict. First, we did not test the same stimuli as theirs: instead, we tested a case focused on a different activity. While Feltz and Cokely's stimuli featured characters making frequent unprompted assertions about the value of their accomplishments, ours featured a character responding to praise, which we considered to be a more natural opportunity for modesty.

Second, our stimuli lacked some of the potentially confusing features found in theirs. For example, their Experiments 1 and 2 compare cases of 'Ignorant Modesty', 'False Modesty', and 'Accurate Modesty', and their conclusion is that "accurate beliefs detracted from virtue and modesty attributions" (Feltz and Cokely 2012, 340). But the characters in both the 'Ignorant' and 'False' conditions are reported as having—and asserting—*true* beliefs. Einstein, one of the best physicists ever, says "I am a good physicist"; John, one of the best darts players ever, says "I am a good darts player". Since these claims are accurate, they are not perfect tests of either ignorant or false modesty. This may partly explain why many of their participants failed comprehension questions: in total, Feltz and Cokely were forced to exclude the results from 75 of the 250 participants in Experiment 1 (30%), and 119 of 318 participants in Experiment 2 (37.4%). This is a very high failure-rate, and so it is not clear that Feltz and Cokely's participants were responding to the stimuli with a full grasp of the material.

The stimuli in our first experiment avoid two potential problems with Feltz and Cokely's study. First, in asking about responses to praise rather than unprompted assertions of skill, they are a more natural example of modest behavior. Second, the wording that we chose makes it very clear that in False Jamie is asserting something she does not believe, and that in Ignorant she has a false belief about her level of skill. This wording is easy to understand, as indicated by the very large difference in knowledge attributions between Ignorant (which earned very low knowledge attributions) and False, Accurate, and Agree (all of which earned very high knowledge attributions). This difference strongly suggests that our participants understood the stimuli. We therefore have reason to believe that the high modesty ratings for Accurate in this experiment, which implies that ignorance is not necessary for modesty, are more representative of folk intuitions about modesty than are Feltz and Cokely's results.

3 Experiment 2 – Motives

Experiment 1 shows that, if the folk concept includes a psychological criterion that provides a distinction between genuine and false modesty, Driver's underestimation account does not capture it. But perhaps this should come as no surprise. After all, Driver's account has been widely criticized, and virtually all other theorists in the modesty debate reject the claim that the modest person needs to be ignorant of her accomplishments. Much of the debate since Driver has therefore concentrated on the question of what psychological criterion, other than ignorance, is characteristic of modesty. One popular account emphasizes the role of the modest person's *desires* and *motives*, rather than her *beliefs*. According to this account, modesty involves de-

emphasizing or downplaying one's accomplishments for the *right* reasons, such as those that stem out of a concern for others. False modesty, by contrast, is when someone publicly de-emphasizes his/her accomplishments for the *wrong* reasons, such as the desire to appear modest to others for personal gain. Ridge (2000), for example, invites us to consider the person who.

is disposed to de-emphasize her accomplishments because she wants to be thought of as modest, regardless of whether she is. The correct and intuitive thing to say about such a person is that she exhibits false modesty, rather than genuine modesty. (272)

Accordingly, those who defend accounts like this suggest that false modesty involves people de-emphasizing or downplaying their accomplishments primarily to advance their own self-interests—so as to appear modest or likeable, for example.

Using the vignette with Jamie and rollerblading, we tested this account by asking our participants to rate how modest Jamie is when she responds to praise for her rollerblading by de-emphasizing her skills. We tested whether her motivation to de-emphasize her skills for the “wrong” reasons (i.e., reasons pertaining to “her own interests”) versus the “right” reasons (i.e., reasons pertaining to “the feelings of others”) had any effect on modesty attributions.

3.1 Method

Participants² were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (Self-Regarding, Other-Regarding) in a between-subjects design. The basic story was the same as the story from Experiment 1. This time we manipulated the agent's motivation for making a statement that de-emphasizes her skills. Here is the text of the conditions:

Self-Regarding. Jamie is very good at rollerblading, and she knows she is very good at rollerblading. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, “Thank you! But I don't think being good at rollerblading is very important.” Jamie says this out of a concern for her own interests.

Other-Regarding. Jamie is very good at rollerblading, and she knows she is very good at rollerblading. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, “Thank you! But I don't think being good at rollerblading is very important.” Jamie says this out of a concern for the feelings of others.

Participants then responded to three questions: a modesty *qua* motivation attribution, an admirability attribution, and a manipulation check:

Modesty DV. When Jamie says what she does, and for that reason, she is being modest.

² $N = 80$, aged 20–64, mean age = 34 years; 34 female; 99% reporting English as a native language.

Admirability. In this scenario, Jamie's motivation for saying what she says is admirable.

Manipulation check. In this scenario, Jamie responds as she does because she wants to serve her own interests/she is concerned about others' feelings.

Responses were collected on the same 7-point Likert scale as in the earlier experiment.

3.2 Results

The manipulation (whether Jamie's motivation is self-regarding or other-regarding) was effective, with participants in each condition tending to agree that the motivation was as described, one sample t-tests (test-proportion = 3): self-regarding, $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.22$, $t(39) = 2.34$, $p = .025$; other-regarding, $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.13$, $t(39) = 5.87$, $p < .001$.

Independent samples t-tests showed that assignment to condition affected modesty attributions and admirability attributions. Mean modesty attribution was lower in the self-regarding condition ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.45$) than in the other-regarding condition ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.96$), $t(67.81) = -3.28$, $p = .002$. The size of the mean difference was large, $MD = -0.90$, 95% CI $[-1.45, -0.35]$, $d = 0.80$. Mean admirability attributions were also lower in the self-regarding condition ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.22$) than in the other-regarding condition ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(78) = -2.28$, $p = .025$. The size of the mean difference was medium, $MD = -0.60$, 95% CI $[-1.12, -0.08]$, $d = 0.52$ (Fig. 2).

3.3 Discussion

In this experiment, we contrasted how modest participants thought Jamie was when she uttered the phrase, "Thank you! But I don't think being good at rollerblading is very important" out of a concern for her own interests versus out of a concern for the interests of others. We did find a significant difference in modesty attributions between the two conditions, with the Self-Regarding condition yielding lower modesty attributions. However, the mean response in this condition was still above the neutral

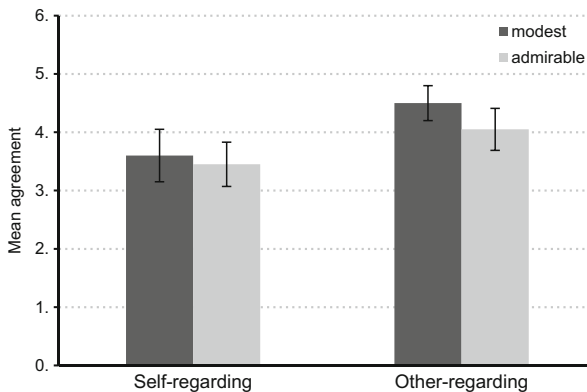


Fig. 2 Experiment 2. Mean agreement with the modesty and admirability attributions. Scales ran 0 (CD) - 6 (CA). Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals

midpoint. As such, it appears that our participants did not think of Jamie as definitively not modest, even when motivated by self-interest. In fact, they tended to rate her as modest, though not as modest as in the Other-Regarding condition. This is in marked contrast to the view that what distinguishes genuine from false modesty is the motive of the putatively modest agent. If the folk concept includes a distinction between genuine and false modesty, it does not turn on the motives of the modest agent.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, out of all of our experiments, this was the only one whose results marginally supported an account of false modesty as characterized in the philosophy literature. In this experiment it does appear that whether an agent's putatively modest utterance was motivated by *self*-regarding or *other*-regarding reasons does influence modesty attributions, even if that influence is relatively weak. Future research might explore whether certain kinds of "wrong reasons," for instance a desire to be admired for behaving modestly, can drive modesty attributions down even further.

4 Experiment 3 – Evaluations of Importance

While Experiment 2 found that motives aren't sufficient to distinguish genuine and false modesty, there may be another psychological condition that will do so. One proposal in the modesty literature concerns, not the agent's motives for behaving in a seemingly modest way, but rather the agent's own private *evaluation* of the importance of her accomplishments. On this view, the modest person can have full knowledge of her accomplishments, so long as she does not think that those accomplishments are so important that they make her better than other people. If modesty involves having an appropriate assessment of the relative importance of one's accomplishments, then according to McMullin, false modesty "is the dishonest and patronizing attempt to communicate to others that one does not believe one's success to be definitive evidence of being better than they are, when in fact one *does* believe it" (italics original 2010, 789). Likewise, Dixon (2005) holds that false modesty is when one restrains "public pronouncements" about their abilities while privately harbouring a "decidedly immodest estimate of them" (417). And like McMullin, such an "immodest estimate," is one where the person believes that his successes make him better *qua* person than other people. Thus, for both McMullin and Dixon, false modesty is when people think privately that their accomplishments make them better than other people, but downplay the importance of those accomplishments publically.

Our third experiment tests this account of modesty. The account shares with Driver's an emphasis on deception, but differs from hers on the subject of that deception: for Driver, what matters is whether the supposedly modest person deceives others about his *beliefs* about his accomplishments. On this new account, by contrast, what matters is whether the supposedly modest person deceives others about her evaluation of how her accomplishments affects her overall worth. For defenders of the evaluative account, a modest person can know that she has impressive accomplishments or abilities, so long as she does not think these accomplishments make her better than other people.

Again, using Jamie and her rollerblading skills, we tested whether participants would think a privately arrogant view of her accomplishments would have an effect on modesty attributions of Jamie.

4.1 Method

Participants³ were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 X 2 (Private Assessment: Important/Unimportant X Response: Downplay/Neutral) between subjects design. Each participant read a single story. Here is the story (Important/Unimportant and Downplay/Neutral variations in brackets):

Important/Downplay: Jamie is very good at rollerblading. Privately, she thinks that being very good at rollerblading is very important: it makes her better than other people. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, "Thank you! But I don't think that rollerblading is very important."

Important/Neutral: Jamie is very good at rollerblading. Privately, she thinks that being very good at rollerblading is very important: it makes her better than other people. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, "Thank you! It's kind of you to say so."

Unimportant/Downplay: Jamie is very good at rollerblading. Privately, she thinks that being very good at rollerblading is not very important: it does not make her better than other people. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, "Thank you! But I don't think that rollerblading is very important."

Unimportant/Neutral: Jamie is very good at rollerblading. Privately, she thinks that being very good at rollerblading is not very important: it does not make her better than other people. When praised for her rollerblading, she says, "Thank you! It's kind of you to say so."

After reading the story, participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with two statements.

Modesty DV: When Jamie said "Thank you! [...]," she was being modest.

Importance: Jamie believes that rollerblading is very important.

Responses were collected on the same standard 7-point Likert scale as in earlier experiments. The 'importance' question was a manipulation check to ensure that participants were aware of Jamie's evaluation of the importance of her accomplishments.

If, as Dixon and McMullin suggest, modesty primarily involves the appropriate evaluation of the importance of one's accomplishments, then *false* modesty will feature seemingly modest behavior alongside a privately immodest evaluation of those accomplishments. If this account of the distinction between modesty and false modesty is correct, then we should expect the following results. First, high modesty attributions for both Private Assessment Unimportant conditions (Unimportant/Downplay; Unimportant/Neutral), since these both feature the kind of private assessment that the evaluative

³ $N = 160$, aged 19–61, mean age = 33 years; 66 female; 99% reporting English as a native language.

account holds as characteristic of modesty. We should also expect somewhat higher modesty ratings in the Downplay response condition than in the Neutral response condition since in that condition Jamie's behavior clearly expresses, and so reinforces, her modest private assessment.

Second, we should expect lower than neutral modesty attributions in both Private Important conditions, since these do not feature the kind of private assessment that evaluative accounts take to be central to modesty. We might also expect somewhat lower modesty attributions in the Downplay response condition than in the Neutral response condition since Downplay, but not Neutral, features clear deception. Such a finding would suggest that deception does influence modesty attributions, though not in the way that Driver originally proposed.

4.2 Results

The manipulation was again effective. (See Fig. 3.) A two-way analysis of variance showed a main effect of Evaluation on modesty attributions, $F(1, 156) = 4.06$, $p = .046$, $\eta^2 = .025$, no effect of Say, $F(1, 156) = 0.24$, $p = .627$, n.s., and no interaction, $F(1, 156) = 0.15$, $p = .152$, n.s. Follow-up pairwise comparisons with independent samples t-tests showed that when the agent downplayed her skill, modesty attributions did not differ between the important condition ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.68$) and the unimportant condition ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.71$), $t(78) = -0.40$, $p = .015$, n.s. By contrast, when the agent responded neutrally to the compliment, attributions were significantly lower in the important condition ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.91$) than in the unimportant condition ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(66.6) = -2.51$, $p = .015$. The size of the mean difference was medium, $MD = -0.90$, 95% CI $[-1.61, -0.19]$, $d = 0.62$.

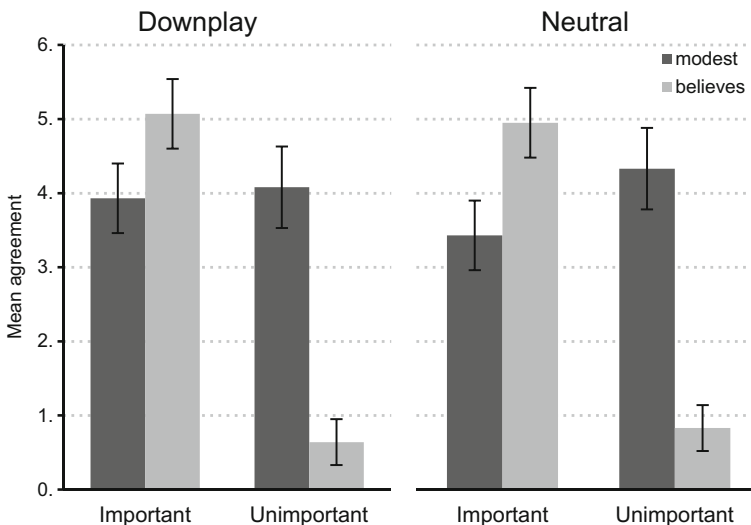


Fig. 3 Experiment 3. Mean agreement with the modesty and belief attributions in the Downplay and Neutral conditions. Scales ran 0 (CD) - 6 (CA). Error bars represent bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals

4.3 Discussion

The results of this experiment suggest that modesty ratings are moderated, first, by downplayed public pronouncements and only secondarily by the agent's thoughts. Jamie's thoughts only had an effect on modesty attributions if Jamie's response to praise was neutral. That is, so long as she outwardly downplayed her skills, people thought she was modest, even if she thought her skills made her better than other people. Also note that, like the other experiments, modesty ratings, on average, were above the neutral mid-point, including in the false modesty condition (Important/Downplay). Thus the evaluative account of false modesty also failed to elicit the expected low modesty scores.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Modesty: Behavioral, Not Psychological

Since Driver's pioneering account, the modesty debate has been dominated by competing attempts to offer a psychological criterion that would distinguish genuine from false modesty. This is true even of those who otherwise completely reject Driver's own account of modesty: it is a standard move in all accounts, whether cognitive, meditational, or evaluative, to insist that an adequate account of modesty must be one that can distinguish it from false modesty and can explain why (unlike false modesty) it is an admirable trait.⁴ Our results strongly suggest, however, that the folk concept of modesty includes no such criterion. So one conclusion that we can draw from the evidence is that the main accounts in the modesty literature all fail to properly capture the folk concept of modesty, since they all exclude some modest behavior on the grounds that it does not have the right psychological origins. They all therefore draw the boundary of the concept more narrowly than the folk conception, which does not include any of the psychological criteria prominent in the debate. On the contrary, the folk concept seems to be largely *behavioral*, and so does not exclude modest behavior that is generated by the supposedly 'false' psychological states emphasized in the philosophical literature. Two out of the four purportedly false modesty conditions (i.e. 'False' in Experiment 1 and 'Important/Downplay' in Experiment 3) received modesty ratings that were just as high as their corresponding 'genuine' modesty conditions. The other two ('Self-regarding' in Experiment 2 and 'Important/Neutral' in Experiment 3) earned slightly lower ratings than their corresponding 'genuine' conditions, but in both the modesty ratings were still above the neutral midpoint. So despite the philosophical debate's broad agreement that modesty requires a specific

⁴ An incomplete but representative sample includes Wilson (2014), who claims his motivational account "appears to get things right with regards (ii) giving an account of false modesty" (78); Schuler (Schueler 1997), whose paper is dedicated in part to showing the error in Allan Bennett's witticism that "all modesty is false modesty, otherwise it wouldn't be modesty" (467); and Ridge (2000), who opens his paper by asserting that an account is untenable if it is "unable to distinguish genuine from false modesty" (269). Even Woodcock (2008), whose social account of modesty makes room for what many theorists would want to treat as false modesty, readily admits that "Driver and her critics are certainly correct to want to avoid the kid of false modesty that involves arrogant beliefs masked behind a veneer of restraint" (11).

psychological origin, the folk concept includes none of the criteria prominent in that debate.

5.2 Objections

One possible objection to our conclusion that the folk concept of modesty does not involve a psychological criterion is that it is irrelevant to the philosophical debate, since the accounts in the philosophical literature are not meant to capture the folk concept of modesty. It may be true that they do not explicitly aim to do so, but the arguments in the philosophical literature about modesty do not introduce it as a novel concept. Nor do they stipulate its definition or introduce it as a philosophical term of art. On the contrary: the arguments assume that the reader has a fairly well-developed sense of what modesty is, and trade on the expectation that the reader will share intuitions about a range of examples. So while the philosophical literature may not simply aim to describe the folk concept, the limits of that concept are still relevant to philosophical theorizing about modesty.

A second possible objection is that we have been too hasty in claiming that the folk conception does not include a psychological element. After all, “false modesty” is a familiar concept as well, but it seems that we’ve denied that the folk concept of modesty could include any such thing. The versions of supposedly false modesty we’ve considered involve a person who behaves modestly for largely self-serving reasons (perhaps she wants people to like her), or who behaves modestly while believing that she is accomplished or that her accomplishments are important. We’ve shown that such cases—which reflect the dominant accounts of false modesty in the literature—are consistent with the folk conception of modesty, which is keyed to modest behavior rather than to the psychological origins of that behavior. But this is consistent with the idea that it is possible that some *other* psychological states can lead to accusations of false or insincere modesty. For example, criticisms of ‘false modesty’ might be reserved for cases where modest behavior is transparently aimed at eliciting further praise. Someone who says “Oh, you’re too kind, my accomplishments really aren’t that impressive” simply in order to hear the praise repeated and emphasized might well be described as falsely modest. That would be a version of self-serving modesty, perhaps, but one that is much narrower than is suggested by and Wilson or McMullin. This is because they take false modesty to involve being motivated simply by a desire to appear modest or virtuous (Wilson 2014) or even just by the *lack* of a desire to avoid causing pain to others (McMullin 2010), rather than by the presence of a specific desire to have one’s virtues publicly praised. Our self-serving false modesty cases are designed to mirror this general approach. While in our vignettes Jamie acted modestly while believing herself to be accomplished, or for self-serving reasons, in none of them was her behavior directly aimed at eliciting further praise.

This is not an oversight on our part, however, since we selected our ‘false modesty’ cases to match with the accounts of false modesty found in the literature. The possibility that there is some seemingly modest behavior that would earn low modesty attributions (or high ‘immodesty’ or ‘false modesty’ attributions) is therefore not an objection to our claim that the accounts of false modesty present in the philosophical literature are inconsistent with the way the folk understand modesty. So while we’d happily admit that someone who behaves modestly only so as to elicit further praise

engages in false modesty, none of the accounts of false modesty in the philosophical literature restricts false modesty to this specifically immodest motivation. On the contrary, each of them identifies a criterion for false modesty that fails to match up with the folk concept. Even if there is a psychological criterion for modesty that distinguishes it from false modesty, then, philosophers have thus far failed to identify it.

A final objection is that it is a mistake to think that there is any such thing as a single unified folk conception of modesty at all.⁵ Instead, there is a range of different conceptions of modesty, with different people employing different ones in different contexts. Experimental philosophers should be cautious—modest, even—about claiming to have uncovered *the* folk conception of any philosophically interesting concept.

This note of caution is an important one. It is, however, compatible with both our results and with the argument we have made. We found evidence of central tendencies suggesting that many, if not most, people employ a modesty concept (or concepts) that does not require the psychological elements we studied. We therefore argued that the folk concept (or concepts) is not unified around a specific psychological criterion, in large part because we found consistent modesty attributions in the absence of each of the criteria we tested. Some people might employ psychological concepts, but most do not. So our findings are compatible with there being several different folk concepts. What we have argued is that there is no single unifying psychological criterion that underlies folk attributions of modesty, and that many such attributions are made largely on the basis of behavior. More research would be required to determine whether such attributions in fact reflect the existence of a range of competing folk conceptions of modesty.

5.3 Is Modesty a Virtue?

One possibility strongly suggested by the evidence is that, for the folk, *modesty is not a virtue*. One reason is that modest behavior seems to be consistent with some potential vices, including deception, condescension, and perhaps even arrogance. More generally, however, modesty isn't a virtue, as the concept is normally understood in moral philosophy, since the virtues involve *psychological* and not merely *behavioral* dispositions. On the dominant Aristotelian conception, virtue "is about feeling and action": it involves both behavioral and psychological dispositions. It is not enough to simply *act* in the way required by virtue, since "having these feelings at the right time, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way... is proper to virtue" (Aristotle 1999, 24). The person who *behaves* as the generous person does, but who resents having to do so, or who has to fight the temptation to be selfish, or who simply does so because she thinks it will make her look good, does not in fact behave generously, even though she might perform the same action as the generous person. If the folk conception of modesty does not include a psychological criterion, it is not a good candidate to be an example of an Aristotelian virtue.⁶

⁵ We thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

⁶ An independent reason that modesty is not an Aristotelian virtue is that, in his description of the magnanimous person—who he regards as *particularly* virtuous—Aristotle emphasizes that this person "thinks himself worthy of great things" is "concerned especially with honor and dishonors", and even "seems arrogant." Someone who underrates her accomplishments, by contrast, is "pusillanimous" which is a vice that mirrors vanity (Aristotle 1999, 56–59).

This implication of our experiments that modesty may not be a virtue is a striking one, since it challenges a widespread assumption in the modesty literature. Indeed, the central focus in the literature is on asking *why* modesty is a virtue, not *whether* it is (e.g., Allhoff 2009; Ben-Ze'ew 1993; Brennen Brennan 2007; Dixon 2005; Maes 2004; McMullin 2010; Schuler Schueler 1997; Schueler 1999). So, while most others grapple with explaining away modesty's peculiarities that threaten its status as a virtue (i.e. its links with either ignorance or deception), we have provided strong empirical reasons to accept them head on. We'd like to urge, then, that if modesty scholars are serious about representing the folk concept of modesty in their accounts, they would do well to take seriously the implications of the data reported here. Specifically, we suggest that modesty scholars emphasize behavioral dimensions of modesty and accept that it may not be a virtue, since our findings suggest it lacks a psychological criterion and allows for vices like deception. If modesty *is* a virtue, the existing philosophical accounts have not succeeded in clearly setting out the relevant psychological criterion. Future research on modesty should therefore explore whether more fine-grained psychological criteria might suppress modesty attributions in cases of apparently modest behavior. If modesty does include a psychological criterion, however, none of the existing accounts have identified it, and it remains an open possibility that the folk concept of modesty lacks any such criterion.

If it turns out that modesty is simply behavioral and lacks a psychological criterion, however, there is still a non-Aristotelian account of virtue that might capture the sense in which the folk conception of modesty is a virtue. Julia Driver has a broadly consequentialist understanding of the virtues that differs with the Aristotelian approach in part by downplaying the relevance of psychological factors. On Driver's view, a virtue is a behavioral disposition that reliably produces morally good actions (2001). Psychological dispositions are *indirectly* relevant to the extent that they influence behavioral dispositions: someone who experiences less fear is, other things being equal, more likely to perform a courageous action than someone who is paralyzed by fear. But whether or not a person has a virtue is *directly* determined only by her behavioral dispositions, rather than by the combination of her behavioral and psychological dispositions.

So while Driver's own account modesty might fail to capture the folk conception of modesty, her account of *virtue* is perhaps best placed to explain why modesty might nonetheless remain a virtue. Interestingly, this is because her account of modesty includes a psychological criterion—false belief—that the folk conception lacks. So in a sense the folk conception of modesty is more true to Driver's behavioral account of virtue than Driver's own account is.

5.4 Is Modesty Valuable?

Of course, whether modesty is a virtue in even Driver's consequentialist or behavioral sense depends in large part on whether the general tendency to underestimate or downplay one's accomplishments does indeed have broadly beneficial consequences. Most parties to the debate agree that modesty is a good thing, and that it is properly counted as a virtue: for the most part, the disagreement is about *why* it is a virtue. In part, this is because there is broad agreement that modesty is socially useful. On this, it seems, the folk agree: Experiment 2 shows that people tend to consider modesty to be morally admirable. Participants were somewhat more likely to describe *other*-regarding

modest behavior as admirable, but agreement that even *self*-regarding modest behavior was admirable was above the neutral midpoint.

While we've shown that the folk conception of modesty may not be a virtue as the virtues are standardly understood, our results do not show—and we have not argued—that it is a vice, or that it does not have many beneficial consequences. Modesty may well be a valuable disposition: we've simply argued that the folk understanding of the concept does not include the psychological elements typical of the virtues.

Still, we are less convinced than many others in the debate that modesty deserves all the praise it receives. It is true that modesty can serve a valuable social function by reducing conflict and resentment. Modest people are easier to get along with than boastful ones. But modesty might have a dark side. It's important for the powerful to be modest, perhaps, but encouraging members of relatively low-status groups to downplay their accomplishments—and criticizing them as brash, pushy, or arrogant when they don't—could have the effect of reinforcing unjust social hierarchies. In other words, there may be a risk that encouraging modesty could have sexist, racist, and classist implications and effects. Modesty certainly has beneficial effects, and it would perhaps be unambiguously valuable in a world without unjust social hierarchies. Nonetheless, given that we live in a world rife with such hierarchies, perhaps it is time to reconsider the unquestioned assumption that modesty is, all things considered, valuable.

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