



Reclaiming the Virtue of Pride

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To many people pride seems to smack of elitism, egotism and vanity—all of which are clearly vices. Even those who are not particularly religious are aware of the old adage from Proverbs that “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,” and that pride is ranked among the seven deadly sins. Our American bias against pride stems from a deep-rooted egalitarianism that hesitates to draw distinctions among human beings. Just as we abhor the thought that any one human being is in any way inferior to any other, we also don’t like the idea that some people are markedly superior. The very idea of pride makes us uncomfortable.

The ancient Greeks, however, had no such ambivalence towards pride. For Aristotle, pride is not just an excellence, but the “crown of the virtues” (*Ethics* 1123a34-1125a35). But Aristotle is also very careful to make certain important distinctions in his own understanding of pride. A proud person, he maintains, is one who believes himself worthy of great things—most notably honors and recognition—and is correct in believing so. Pride for Aristotle is not just a feeling: it is an accurate awareness that one possesses some excellence not shared by many, which enables its possessor “to stand out among the multitude” (Taylor, 32). Because pride must be justified through real accomplishment, the proud person cannot be considered vain. A person is vain if he thinks himself worthy of great things, but is in fact not. On the other hand, a person who is worthy of great things, but thinks himself not to be is unduly humble. Both the vain and the humble person, according to Aristotle, suffer from a defect of character stemming from a mistaken perception of their own excellence.

Although it seems obvious that vanity is a vice—who really likes a vain person, after all?—it is difficult for most Americans to accept the idea that there is something equally wrong with humility. Aristotle himself suggests that humility is a less egregious vice than vanity, since the humble person is only mistaken about himself, not necessarily morally bad (*Ethics* 1125a18022). However, one could argue that humility can be a more serious character defect than even Aristotle makes it out to be. In undervaluing his own positive qualities, the humble man does an injustice to himself insofar as he deprives himself of that which is his due. Furthermore, the humble person is either engaged in self-deception if he isn’t aware of the honors to which he is entitled, or even worse, he is untruthful, if he claims not to be worthy of honors, when in fact he knows he is. In some cases humility can be little more than a mask for extreme vanity. A supposedly humble person, for example, may persistently protest that his obviously extraordinary achievements “are really nothing” because he really wants others to continually sing his praise. Such an individual uses humility as a tool to elicit even more vehement accolades than he might have received solely by virtue of his own accomplishment. In the end, it would be far more honest to respond to

praise simply by saying, “Thank you very much; it is kind of you to say so.”

It is important to note that pride, as a self-referring virtue, has little to do with the appreciation that others have of our own gifts. Van Gogh, for example, could rightly feel proud of his extraordinary painting ability, even though most of his own contemporaries failed to recognize his talent during his lifetime. A person can also feel proud of an excellence that most people might regard as unimportant. A woman who devotes her life to raising happy, compassionate, and well-adjusted children can feel proud about her abilities as a mother, even if motherhood in our own society is viewed as being an inferior vocation for a woman (Taylor, 37-38).

If we grant that people have every right to feel proud about their real accomplishments, does this automatically mean that everyone will have something in their lives to feel proud about? Although we might be tempted to say that this is true—that everyone excels at some particular function or role in his life—Richard Taylor argues that such a view is overly idealistic. Most human beings, he maintains, actually live lives that are, quite frankly, undistinguished at best:

So many people—perhaps even most—do lapse into that dead kinship with the beasts and do not even see anything wrong with it. They go through life with hardly an original thought; gravitate from one pleasure or amusement to another; gain a livelihood doing what someone else has assigned; flee boredom as best they can; marry and beget children; and then, without having made the slightest difference of any unique significance, die and decay like any animal (115).

In Taylor’s view the vast majority of humans function at a level of such mediocrity and banality that their actual accomplishments amount to almost nothing. They never have an original or profound thought, never accomplish anything of significance or make any kind of lasting mark upon the world. Subsequently, they can have nothing in their lives about which to feel legitimately proud.

Although it may be an exaggeration to suggest that the vast majority of human beings are little more than glorified cattle, we should not dismiss Taylor’s comments simply because they strike us as being unduly harsh. A large number of human beings do, in fact, settle for mediocrity in most aspects of their lives. If we look around at our own communities, we will undoubtedly find that most men and woman aim at nothing more than simply getting through life: if they have enough to eat, a roof over their heads, and a few creature comforts, they are more than satisfied. But, to be a bit more generous than Taylor is, there are also many human beings who are hard-working and honest employees, dedicated parents, devoted friends, and morally upright and concerned citizens. In their own way they leave the world a better place and can rightly feel proud of their less “heroic” accomplishments.

It is precisely because so many human beings rarely if ever attempt to excel in any aspect of their lives that it is essential to reclaim the lost virtue of pride. The basic problem with American egalitarianism—the misguided notion that everyone is equal regardless of their accomplishments—is that it can only lead to an acceptance of the most minimal standards for ourselves and others. The fanatical attempt of Americans to eliminate all distinctions of merit between people leads to the establishment of a cult of the mediocre, where “just showing up” becomes a tremendous achievement. But if everyone is wonder-

ful and deserving of praise no matter how much or how little they accomplish, then where is the incentive for any of us to try to improve ourselves?

A recognition of the importance of pride, on the other hand, forces us on an endless quest to try to actualize our potential for excellence. As Richard Taylor points out, in reclaiming a sense of pride we may ultimately come to view our own lives as works of art:

Instead of supposing that a work of art must be something that all can behold—a poem, a painting, a book, a great building—consider making your own life a work of art. You have yourself to begin with, and a time of uncertain duration to work on it. You do not have to be what you are, and even though you may be quite content with who you are, it will not be hard for you to think of something much greater that you might become. It need not be something spectacular or even something that will attract notice from others. What it will be is a kind of excellence that you project for yourself, and then attain—something that you can take a look at, with honest self-appraisal, and be proud of (64).

To view one's life as a work of art is to recognize that we are capable of becoming better and greater than we currently are. And if your life is a kind of self-creation, you don't have to remain as you currently are; you can reinvent yourself as often as is necessary. The only question that remains is what kind of human being you would choose to become if you weren't at all concerned with having to make a living or with what other people thought about you.

SOURCES

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. W.D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908.

Taylor, Richard. *Pride: The Lost Virtue of Our Age*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1995.

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