

When Self Takes CENTER STAGE

Exploring the folly of **pride** and the virtue of **wisdom**

Is pride a vice or a virtue?

A father watches anxiously as his twenty-six-year-old son positions himself on the starting blocks of the 400-meter semi-finals. It is the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, and Jim Redmond has supported his son's running career from the very beginning. In this moment he swells with pride at his son's achievements.

The starting gun fires, and Derek Redmond takes off down the track, determined to continue his phenomenal success. Midway through the race, however, Derek tears a muscle in his leg and collapses. The upward trajectory of his success is suddenly halted, and his body and spirit lay prostrate in agony on the track as his competitors race to the finish. With no hope of earning anything other than last place, Derek pulls himself up and hobbles down the track toward the finish line.

Meanwhile, Jim Redmond sprints down from the upper rows of the stands and leaps over the barrier surrounding the track to join his son. With 100 meters left in the race, Jim reaches Derek, puts his arm around his defeated son, and the two of them finish the race together in sweat, pain, and tears.

Was it pride that enabled Derek to finish the race, or did he swallow his pride by allowing his father to finish with him? Did Derek earn his father's pride through his achievements, and did Jim have to swallow his pride in order to assist his son?

"I'm the proudest father alive," Jim told the press afterward. "I'm prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the gold medal."

What do we mean by this word, *pride*?

Michael Eric Dyson notes in his short book entitled *Pride*, "If pride is a sin, it is no ordinary sin, to be sure."

When we consider the seven deadly sins, pride seems the most unlikely to be a sin at all. Envy, gluttony, lust, and greed are obviously all vices. But pride? What about the pride a parent has for a child? The pride citizens take in their nation? Black pride? Is it wrong to be proud to be a Christian? Are these sinful vices?

Certainly arrogance is ugly; vanity is laughable; conceitedness is unso- cialable. But pride? Compared to these synonyms, it appears outright noble. Isn't pride exactly what abused or disenfranchised groups need in this world? And yet, citing a host of bibli- cal texts and countless thinkers over

the centuries, Christians rightly claim that pride is a cardinal sin, perhaps even the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. Pride is a complex vice indeed.

The seven deadly sins, estab- lished in the Christian canon by Pope Gregory I in the sixth century and affixed in the West- ern imagination through Dante's fourteenth-century masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, retain their cultural currency in American society. In the succeeding two millennia, the list has remained relatively unchanged: pride, sloth, gluttony, lust, greed, envy, and anger.

As the news stories of the past year attest, we are all too ready to use these cardinal sins to shame our public figures. We criticize the greed of hedge fund managers, the lust of unfaithful politicians, the anger of terrorists, or the gluttony of consump- tion within wealthy nations. Last month we introduced virtues and vices in general as a Christian moral tradition helpful for discerning the moral life. The wealth of this tradi- tion, however, lies not in its useful- ness as a tool to aim at those easy to despise but rather as it calls us all to more faithful living. This month



SLOTH
GLUTTONY
LUST
GREED
ENVY
ANGER

PRIDE

Throughout the history of the seven deadly sins, the Christian church has given the particular sin of pride, well, pride of place in the list. As many Christian thinkers have understood it, pride is the root of all other sins.

we examine the vice of *pride* and the virtue of *wisdom*.

Throughout the history of the seven deadly sins, the Christian church has given the particular sin of pride, well, pride of place in the list. As many Christian thinkers have understood it, pride is the root of all other sins. This claim appears, perhaps, overly bold.

Doesn't each of us struggle with our own set of issues, demons, and unique vices? If indeed all people sin and fall short of the glory of God, surely not everyone struggles with pride.

To appreciate why pride is the root of all sin, we should first note that the seven deadly sins are not a list of individual personality traits like a

medieval version of the Myers-Briggs personality test. Their breadth speaks to human nature as such and its relation to the Creator. The usefulness of the list is not simply in its particulars, but rather because it gives a sense of

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the integrated whole of sin moving through the human person. The sin of pride lies at the center of that whole.

Despite its varied use in contemporary American culture, in the language of Christian ethics, *pride is the soul's turning away from God and toward the self*. As a turning away from something and toward something else, pride entails a conversion that mimics one's conversion to Christ. Pride de-centers our soul's orientation such that the prideful person perceives and acts as if he or she is at that center of existence. Placing oneself at the center, we are unable to see reality as it really is, because as William Mattison says, pride is "seeing all of reality through the warped lens of 'what does it have to do with me.'"

Put otherwise, *pride is a fixation on one's own life and desires*. This fixation engenders outright aversion to the commands of God and the place the self has in the divine order.

Of course, we become most aware of pride when we encounter it in others as a kind of public boasting, chest thumping, or other palpable display of self-centeredness. But as with many of the seven vices, pride enters our own lives with more subtlety. Pope Gregory claimed pride occurs when a person "favors himself in his thought: and walks with himself along the broad spaces of his thought and silently utters his own praises."

The turn toward the self becomes particularly tempting not only in our individualistic American culture but among us evangelicals and pietists as well. Those of us who emphasize a personal God, a personal story of salvation, and a personal relationship to our Redeemer cannot help but be faced with the temptations of pride that accompany such an elevation of

self in the Christian life. The problem, of course, is not in making my religious faith personal to me and to my story. The problem is the temptation to make the Christian life ultimately about me and not about the Creator.

As noted, pride is at the root of the other six vices. Many have spelled out trajectories through the seven sins, and we can suggest such a trajectory here. Pride (the turning away from God and toward the self) leads to allowances for sloth (or spiritual apathy and laziness), which leads to allowances for gluttony or for lust (or disordered desires due to a loss of spiritual ballast), which, when universalized, easily leads to greed (a centering of all desires upon the self), which provokes the envy of others (since others appear to get what I desire, but can't seem to get for myself), which, when left to fester over time, fuels anger (a bitterness toward others for the goodness they enjoy, and an accompanying desire for vengeance). Pride, as the lack of clear vision of the good, the absence of wisdom that knows the source of all goodness in God, and the dearth of humility to act according to God's commands, lies behind each of these other sins.

If pride is the root of sin, wisdom is the preeminent virtue and an antidote to pride. This may seem odd, for it appears that pride is a problem of attitude not aptitude. Each of us probably knows a smart but arrogant person or two—the last thing they need is more intelligence. Rather, we might argue, what they really need is humility. I would claim, however, that while we might call upon the proud person to be humble, what we desire is that the proud person become wise.

Wisdom is the virtue of those who know and recognize the truth and understand its ultimate source to be in God. Wisdom enables us to re-center our lives on God and understand our rightful place in the world. If all the virtues enable us to live well and act rightly, we cannot live or act well if we do not possess the wisdom to see and understand rightly. In this sense, the "pride" that a disenfranchised group needs is really a form of wisdom that seeks justice for their rightful place in the world. The "pride" that virtuous people have for their own goodness is really a wisdom that knows their own goodness originates in God. The "pride" that Jim Redmond had for his son was really the wisdom to see what was more important than the gold medal itself.

Now certainly not all knowledge is wisdom. St. Paul is fond of berating a kind of knowledge that merely "puffs up." Yet we seek a wisdom that grounds us in the reality of our "creatureliness." Augustine notes when someone turns toward themselves in pride (as opposed to humility), that person does not see the whole self since what it means to be a self is bound to our source, our creator. Prideful persons have a distorted view of self, not only when they

For further reading

A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart, by Josef Pieper. Translated by Paul C. Duggan. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991.

The Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri. Translated by C. H. Sisson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics, by Samuel Wells. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004.

Pride, by Michael Eric Dyson. The Seven Deadly Sins series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues, by Andre Comte-Sponville. Translated by Catherine Temerson. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

Treatise on the Virtues, by Thomas Aquinas. Translated by John A. Oesterle. South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1992.

puff up their own virtues inaccurately (i.e., failing to acknowledge their own shortcomings), but when they are ignorant of their dependence upon the source of all good gifts—God.

Augustine teaches us again that in pride, the mind becomes subject to what is inferior (the self). In humility, though, the mind becomes subject to what is superior, namely God, and that is its exaltation.

Many in the Christian tradition have considered humility not merely an affect of the heart, but precisely as a form of wisdom. Solomon himself notes in Proverbs 11:2, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble.”

Bernard of Clairvaux considers humility as a form of wisdom in his sermons on the Song of Songs: “There are then different kinds of knowledge, one contributing to self-importance, the other to sadness. Which of the two do you think is more useful or necessary to salvation, the one that makes you vain or the one that makes you weep?... [Paul] does not forbid thinking, but inordinate thinking. And what is meant by thinking with sober judgment? It means taking the utmost care to discover what are the essential and primary truths, for time is short.... There is nothing more effective, more adapted to the acquiring of humility, than to find out the truth about oneself.... If you lack self-knowledge you will possess neither the fear of God nor humility.”

To conclude, as we consider this pairing of pride and wisdom, perhaps the simplest way to put it is that *pride is arrogant ignorance*. Pride entails an inability to see things as they truly are, particularly oneself as a creature of God, and thus is blind to the good. Wisdom is the virtue of those who know and recognize the truth, which in turn enables the performance of all the other virtues. Wisdom, as correct vision of the good and our place in the divine order, turns our hearts and minds back to God, the source of all excellence and virtue. ■