

The deadly sin of pride

Sexual ethics aside, traditional Christian teaching nowhere clashes more sharply with contemporary sensibilities than on the moral status of pride. Christians have long counted pride as a sin—indeed, the “original sin” that generates every other and is the vital principle in each. C.S. Lewis speaks for many Christian moralists when he calls pride “the essential vice, the utmost evil.” He asserts that pride “is the complete anti-God state of mind” (Lewis, 1980, pp. 121-22). Many people today, however, view pride as a virtue and a key component in emotional maturity and self-actualization. Therapists seek to instill in clients positive self-regard, teachers try to boost student self-esteem, and social movements justify their programs in the name of gay pride, black pride, and the like. It might seem, therefore, that Christians in the “people helping” professions are caught between incompatible perspectives. As Christians, they have been taught that pride is a vice; as professionals, they have been trained to view pride as a virtue. Which is true?

Most Christian social workers and therapists already know that there is truth on both sides. They have seen how pride causes clients to refuse help or rebel against legitimate authority. They have also seen how people without proper pride become trapped in abusive relationships or give up on themselves. What Christian professionals need is a nuanced analysis that integrates insights from the Christian tradition, contemporary social sciences, and reality “on the ground” in order to distinguish sinful pride from its health-giving cousins. They also need a clear grasp of pride’s chief characteristics and consequences in order to rightly apprehend the nature of the countervailing virtue, humility. It is to these needs that I address this article.

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THE NATURE OF PRIDE

Few words in our moral vocabulary convey so wide a spectrum of meanings as “pride.” It can connote anything from narcissism to self-confidence to self-respect. Many disagreements over the moral status of pride can be traced to differences in how the word is understood. A classic definition of vicious pride is the one put forward by the Medieval Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza: “Pride is thinking more highly of oneself than is just, out of love for oneself” (Neu, 1999, p. 54). In other words, pride is inordinate self-esteem arising out of self-centeredness. Although correct as far as it goes, this definition does not quite do justice to pride’s irreligiousness and aggressiveness. I would propose, therefore, that pride is best viewed as an irreligious and antisocial assertion of the self. But before fleshing out what this definition entails, it is important to distinguish pride from related but different concepts.

CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT

Pride should not be confused with self-respect. Unlike pride, self-respect does not imply feelings of superiority. As the philosopher Jerome Neu points out, it has to do with rights and dignity, not merit (Neu, 1999, p. 74). The person with self-respect “has her pride,” but that means she is ashamed to violate her conscience, not that she thinks herself better than others (Taylor, 1985, p. 50). Self-respect is indispensable to a life of virtue. It is the skeleton of the soul that protects integrity by preventing the wrong sort of flexibility. A person may have too much self-esteem, but no one can have too much self-respect (Neu, 1999, p. 74).

Pride should also not be confused with proper self-esteem. Christians are sometimes quick to condemn all self-satisfaction as an expression of sin. There is a proper self-esteem that is the result of evaluating oneself with “sober judgment” (Rom. 12:3). It is not based

on stock portfolios, beauty contests, or social prominence; it is the fruit of a clear-eyed assessment of one’s own character and achievements. As such, proper self-esteem is a barometer that rises and falls with the quality of one’s life. Good people should feel good about themselves; bad people should not.

Pride should not be confused with self-love. Christians commonly condemn self-love as a form of narcissism. But Jesus himself commanded his followers to love others as themselves (Matt. 22:39). As Frederick Buechner notes, Christ’s command can legitimately be reversed to say “love yourself as you love others.” Buechner adds that self-love “does not mean your pulse should quicken every time you look into a mirror any more than its supposed to quicken every time your neighbor passes the window” (Buechner, 2004, pp. 322-23). One can care for self and others without being enamored of either. Obsession with oneself is not true self-love, just as obsession with a lover is not true romance.

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Finally, pride should not be confused with feeling proud. Pride is an enduring character trait; “feeling proud” is a transitory emotion. One can feel proud without being proud. A researcher who discovers an important new cancer therapy can be elated by her achievement without being “puffed up” by it. Indeed, if her work leads

to public honors, she will likely feel both proud and humbled by the recognition. A man whose son joins a prestigious New York law firm might almost “burst with pride,” but his feelings are a proper and natural expression of love. The father identifies with his son and thus shares his elation. Ironically, the failure to feel pride over honors received by oneself or loved ones may actually be an expression of pride. It may reflect a sense of superiority—a haughty disdain for honors and the people who give them (Taylor, 1985, pp. 43, 45-46).

VICIOUS PRIDE

Sinful pride must not, then, be confused with self-respect, proper self-esteem, self-love, or “feeling proud”—each of which is essential for human flourishing. As already noted, pride is best viewed as an irreligious and antisocial assertion of the self. We see this in the way pride elevates the self over others. We say the proud are “stuck up” and complain that they “look down their noses” at everyone else. We complain that they ride a “high horse” and isolate themselves in an “ivory tower.” We criticize them for acting “high and mighty.” The Hebrew Bible often highlights pride’s penchant for heights. In the primeval history, humankind seeks to build “a tower with its top in the heavens” (Gen. 11:4). Proverbs depicts the proud as having “lofty eyes” (Pro. 30:13). Jeremiah speaks of proud Moab’s “loftiness” (Jer. 48:29; cf. Isa. 2:11). Isaiah records a king’s boast that he will “ascend to heaven,” raise his throne “above the stars of God,” and make himself “like the Most High” (Isa. 14:13-14).

Another way to say the same thing is to say pride expands the self. The proud are “full of themselves”—“puffed up” or “inflated” with self-importance. They fantasize about being “larger than life” and fear nothing more than shrinking in power or visibility. Proud people assert themselves and disregard the opinions and needs of others. They resent any boundary that constricts their freedom to act as they wish.

The proud also assert the self by laying claim to glory. They imagine themselves to be radiant with success or beauty or intelligence or virtue or piety. Their self-glorification can sometimes lapse into absurdity, as when Nebuchadnezzar surveyed the city of Babylon from atop his palace and exclaimed, “Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?” (Dan. 4:30). Although scripture says that all human beings have been “crowned” with glory (Psa. 8:5), Nebuchadnezzar was not interested in sharing glory with others. Pride finds pleasure only in what

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sets it apart. That is why William May calls pride “the sin of the first person singular.” Proud people

not only put themselves before others, they separate themselves from others—sometimes under the cover of religious piety. May notes, for example, that a proud monk will be intent on proving himself to be “singular and exceptional.” He will be “inclined to fast more, pray longer, sleep less, look sicker than his fellows, proving that he is a singularly holy man.” Any discipline that “must be done in common with his brothers automatically loses its luster” (May, 1967, p. 184).

VARIETIES OF PRIDE

We can see, then, that pride is an assertion of the self that is both irreligious and antisocial. The actual form pride takes will vary from person to person. In general, however, we may say that the “genus” pride appears in three “species”: vanity, conceit, and arrogance.

1. *Vanity*. Vanity is preoccupied with appearances. The vain person does not so much seek to be admirable as to be admired. He or she derives self-esteem from the turned head, public honors, and tokens of success. Taylor notes, “The vain offer their appearance as a means of seducing others into thinking well of them, which in turn is a means of seducing themselves to think well of themselves” (Taylor, 2006, pp. 76-77).

Because the vain depend on an admiring audience to brace up their tenuous self-esteem, they are vulnerable to the shifting opinions of the crowd, the passage of time, the contingencies of fate, and the prominence of competitors. Vanity is thus the most fragile form of sinful pride. In a sense, it is the most “humble” form of pride because it relies on the approval of others (Lewis, 1980, p. 126). Of course, vanity’s self-preoccupation, lust for the limelight, and snobbishness are devoid of authentic humility.

2. *Conceit*. Conceit is an exaggerated opinion of one’s virtues and accomplishments. It seeks not so much excellence as superiority and therefore is inherently com-

petitive (Taylor, 2006, pp. 73-74). As a result, conceit is intensely adversarial. It demands preeminence and will brook no rival. If need be, the conceited will diminish others to elevate themselves—as when an academic dismisses a colleague’s genius by noting her lack of “common sense,” or when a musician disparages a peer’s work because it is too popular to be “serious.” We see conceit in the Pharisee who, casting a contemptuous glance at a nearby tax collector, piously thanked God that he was not “like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11).

Conceit depends on transmuting real or imagined virtues into a general feeling of personal superiority. Thus, a conceited physicist who cannot hit a baseball, play a violin, or manage a small business will think himself superior to those who can—superior, that is, as a human being, not simply as a scientist. The conceited person thinks himself superior in everything that really matters. Taylor comments,

It is not just that he thinks his social status, or his taste, or his learning is superior to that of others; he also takes it for granted that these characteristics are so central to superiority that nothing else will count: he is superior in the areas that matter and in the only areas that matter. If there is some respect in which another excels and he does not, then this is neither here nor there as far as the superiority of his position is concerned (Taylor, 1985, pp. 44-45).

It should be noted that conceit consists in the self-perception of superiority whether or not it has been “earned.” People may, for example, take pride in being born with exceptional athletic ability, a fine singing voice,

or even white skin. That is why the apostle Paul failed to puncture the Corinthians’ conceit when he demanded, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor. 4:6).

3. *Arrogance*. Arrogance is a feeling of superiority that shows itself in a lofty, overbearing manner. Whereas vanity needs admirers and conceit needs inferiors, arrogance needs no one. It stands clear of the crowd. The arrogant are a law unto themselves; they do not need other people to validate their self-image. What other people think or achieve is neither here nor there. The arrogant are too proud to be vain or conceited (Taylor, 1985,

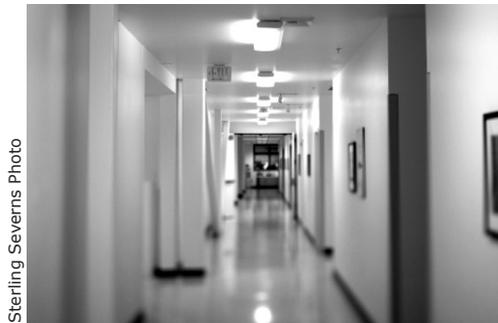
p. 48; Taylor, 2006, p. 82). We may say, then, that arrogance is the epitome of pride—the “sin of the first person singular” in its purest expression.

These three forms of pride—vanity, conceit, and arrogance—often crop up together in various combinations and degrees. In-

dividuals tend to fall into predominate types, but people are complex and constantly changing and so are likely to defy simple labels. A arrogant executive, for example, might amuse his colleagues by some petty vanity—such as his odd way of combing hair over a bald spot, or his refusal to wear glasses in public. Or a successful author’s conceit might float free into a general attitude of arrogance. Vanity, conceit, and arrogance are distinguishable but not discreet concepts. Classifying pride into three species has merely a heuristic value. It helps to lay bare the varied and subtle manifestations of sinful pride.

CONSEQUENCES OF PRIDE

Pride gives rise to human misery as sowing a field yields a harvest. From a biblical point of view, we may say that pride leads to calamity, fosters self-contempt and self-pity, undermines



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community, and alienates from God.

1. Pride leads to calamity. “Pride goes before destruction,” says the sage, “and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). The fall of the proud is often ascribed in the Bible to divine judgment. The proud Persian courtier Haman was hung from the very gallows he had built for the execution of Mordecai—a man who had infuriated Haman by refusing to do obeisance. Nebuchadnezzar exulted in his own glory and was rewarded with madness. He did not return to his throne until he “learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to who he will” (Dan. 4:30-33). King Sennacherib boasted of his might and defied God—and shortly thereafter was murdered by his sons. Herod was lauded as a god, but he was struck down by an angel “because he had not given glory to God” (Acts 12:20-21). The psalmist declared that God had placed the proud on slippery ground: even at the height of their prosperity and earthly security, they are never far from ruin (Psalm 73:4-20). Obadiah declared to Edom,

Your proud heart has deceived you,
you that live in the clefts of the rock,
whose dwelling is in the heights.
You say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the ground?”
Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
from there I will bring you down, says the
LORD (Obadiah 1:3-5).

A day is coming, said Isaiah, when “the haughty eyes of people shall be brought low, and the pride of everyone will be humbled” (Isa. 2:11).

Passages such as these do not mean that God imposes arbitrary penalties to “punish” the proud. The biblical view of sin and punishment is rooted in the ancient Hebrew habit of treating wrongdoing and its penalty as different aspects of a single phenomenon. For the Hebrew mind, sin consists both in wrong done and consequences endured. Guilt cannot be separated from its painful results. That is why the Old Testament says that God brings a sinner’s conduct down upon his own head (1

Kings 8:32). God does not so much “punish” sin as uphold the moral order he has created. This moral order was designed to secure human well-being, but those who violate it injure themselves, others, and the creation (Biddle, 2005, pp. 14, 123–24).

Pride’s own trajectory leads to disaster. Proud people spread calamity by overestimating their abilities, setting unrealistic goals, refusing to respect appropriate limits, and pushing themselves too hard (Schimmel, 1992, p. 30). Thus corporate climbers become dependent on amphetamines, ambitious pastors lead churches into fiscal disaster, and athletes overtrain and sustain career-ending injuries. Pride also leads to “spectacularly bad judgments” because proud people pursue their grandiose goals without adequate planning or resources. As William Willimon points out, people convinced of their own brilliance are sure to make stupid mistakes—as when someone thinks a string of business successes makes him a financial genius who can ignore standard business practices. Such a person stands on the precipice of disaster (Willimon, 2005, pp. 36-37). The consequences of pride’s rashness can be far-reaching. Schimmel notes,

In our society, where knowledge is power and experts shape public policy in every field, intellectual arrogance is common and can be dangerous. The economist, military strategist, or physician who, so sure of him-



self that he neglects to solicit information and advice from others, can be responsible for events that can bring harm to many (Schimmel, 1992, p. 32).

“The wise are cautious and turn away from evil,” says the Bible, “but the fool throws off restraint and is careless” (Prov. 14:16).

2. *Pride leads to self-contempt and self-pity.* Although pride is a self-expansive vice, it sometimes plunges people into periods of self-contempt and self-pity. This swing from one extreme to the other is paradoxical but not inexplicable. As noted earlier, pride is part of a strategy for coping with low self-esteem. People who think poorly of themselves will often compensate by creating an imaginary self—an “ideal self” thought to possess prized attributes like brilliance, beauty, skill, virtue, or the like. Individuals naturally seek to create an ideal self that they themselves find believable. A plain girl, for example, will be more likely to imagine herself to be an unrecognized genius or a saint than a beauty. Whatever the precise character of the idealized self, its purpose always remains the same: to bolster a fragile self-esteem.

However, no matter how firmly a person identifies with her idealized self, reality has a way of spoiling the fantasy. A self-styled genius may score too low on the GRE to get into graduate school or a “saint” may get caught in a lie. Failure to measure up to the idealized self can sometimes cause a person’s psychological defenses to collapse. She will then swing from grandiosity to self-loathing and self-pity.

To recover her self-esteem, the proud person will likely employ two strategies. She will minimize her failure by insisting that it is inconsequential: to fail in a matter of so little importance was not really a failure at all. She will also attempt to excuse her failure by claiming that success was impossible because of some circumstance beyond her control: the failure did not really “count.” Both strategies allow the proud person to save face. The punctured ego reinflates itself with rationalizations. Pride thus completes the cycle from grandiosity to self-contempt and back again to

grandiosity.

When face-saving excuses portray the self as a victim, pride expresses itself as self-pity. May explains,

Beneath the most unheroic expressions of self-pity can lurk no less stubborn a claim to one’s own divinity. The high estimate of the self in this case is based on a pretension to divine virtue rather than divine power. The man who drenches himself with self-pity is convinced that underneath it all he is a splendid fellow, a rather precious innocent, much abused or neglected by a harsh environment in which he is trapped (May, 1967, p. 185).

Self-pity usually leads to depression. The depression will tend to persist because it serves a pride-saving strategy that the individual is loath to acknowledge or surrender.

3. *Pride undermines community.* Community consists in people living with one another interdependently and with mutual concern. Individuals in a crowd may share nothing but proximity, but individuals in a community have “the same care one for another” (1 Cor. 12:25). The proud, however, are too self-absorbed to empathize with other people. They tend to see others, not as independent persons of worth, but as extensions of themselves. Accordingly, they think nothing of asserting their wants against the legitimate needs of family and friends. Conflict ensues. Resentments and recriminations get stirred up on every side.

The proud are too competitive to live peaceably with others. By seeking first place, they promote quarrels, resentments, envy, and backbiting. We see this in the church at Corinth. Pride had inspired the Corinthians to form cliques around various leaders; and these cliques competed with one another for control and prestige. We see the same phenomenon in the disciples of Jesus, who turned on one another when two of them sought a place of honor above their fellows (Mark 10:35-41).

The proud show contempt toward those they regard as their inferiors. Jesus unmasked a religious form of this attitude when he aimed a parable at those “who trusted in themselves

that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (see Luke 18:9-14). But disdain of others hardly needs religious cover. As Schimmel observes,

In our society the most desirable assets are wealth, power, social status, physical attractiveness, and intelligence. . . . As Aquinas said, a person who possesses more of these than do other people may believe this entitles him to special privilege, or that he is exempt from behaving with respect and empathy toward others. It may make him contemptuous of human weakness and indifferent to the needs of others (Schimmel, 1992, p. 36).

The proud also chafe under the legitimate authority without which no community can survive. We see proud rebellion in two episodes from the life of Moses. In the first, Aaron and Miriam—the brother and sister of Moses—accused their younger sibling of arrogating too much power to himself.

“Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?” they demanded. “Has he not also spoken through us?” (Num. 12). In the second episode, two hundred and fifty leaders in Israel rose up to challenge Moses. “All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them,” they said. “So why do you exalt yourself above the assembly of the LORD?” (Num. 16). In both instances, the integrity of the community was threatened, not by the alleged pride of Moses, who was “very humble,” but by the pride of subordinates who resented legitimate authority.

4. *Pride alienates from God.* Whether consciously or not, the proud are estranged from God. As May explains, “Pride is self-devotion, self-justification, and self-glorifying in contempt of God.” This contempt may give rise to open revolt, but not always. It is usually expressed as “aversion” of God. The proud person finds the existence of God “an unwholesome intrusion into his life—uncomfortable, irritating, and hopelessly confining.” May states that pride consists in “cleaving to the self and its loves and fears in such a way

as to be cold and dead and averse to the presence of God” (May, 1967, pp. 176-77). It is a particular instance of the alienation from God characteristic of unredeemed humanity (Col. 1:21; Eph. 4:18; cf. Rom. 5:10; 8:7).

In effect, pride alienates people from God because it leads them to feel self-sufficient. McCracken comments,

It is the essence of man’s pride to assume that he is self-sufficient and that by his efforts and skills he can take care of himself, order his affairs, do for himself all that has to be done. The serpent in tempting Adam and Eve promised: “You will be as gods.” Here is the primary temptation, to put ourselves where God should be—at the center of things, to ignore our creatureliness and finiteness as though we were self-made and self-adequate, and assert our independence and sovereignty (McCracken, 1966, p. 12).

Vice decays wherever virtue flourishes. One should attack pride by cultivating humility.

This sort of self-assertion is incompatible with a true knowledge of God. As C. S. Lewis explains, “In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all.” Of course, the proud are ready to admit theoretically that they are nothing before God, but they “are really all the time imagining how he approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people” (Lewis, 1980, p. 124). Be it ever so religious, pride alienates humans from God.

THE WAY OF HUMILITY

Vice decays wherever virtue flourishes. One should attack pride by cultivating humility. But just as we had to distinguish pride from related concepts, so we must distinguish authentic humility from sham humility

and self-loss. In the discussion below, I will make the needed distinctions and then offer some thoughts on how one might go about cultivating humility.

CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT

Humility is sometimes confused with sham humility. Authentic humility is based on realistic self-appraisal. The humble evaluate themselves with “sober judgment” (Rom. 12:3). They are sensible and balanced in their judgments because they know that every human being is a mixture of good and bad. For this reason, the humble are able to acknowledge their faults without becoming oppressed by them. Sham humility, on the other hand, lacks a sense of proportion. It elevates peccadillos into crimes against heaven. It counts every flaw as proof that the



self is fundamentally defective. Sham humility leaves one feeling demoralized, depleted, weak, fragile, and hopeless (Rubin, 1975, p. 29). People who live under a cloud of sham humility are “condemned to live constricted, deformed, frustrating lives, cut off from possibilities for self-realization, self-fulfillment, and happiness.” Robin Dillon explains,

When the abiding flavor of your life is shame or self-contempt; when you have a profound and pervasive sense of yourself as inadequate, pathetic, like dirt; when your life feels meaningless, your activities of little value, your abilities minimal, your character base; when feelings of worthlessness swamp everything else—

when living feels like this, living well is impossible (Dillon, 1997, p. 226).

The roots of sham humility vary from person to person. Some people disparage themselves because their self-identity has been shaped by criticism or abuse. Others disparage themselves to preempt criticism or elicit sympathy. Still others do it when they feel shame for failing to earn more money, write more books, attract more attention, or demonstrate more saintliness than others. Whatever its source, sham humility is a knock-off of the real virtue and must not be confused with it.

Humility is sometimes confused with self-loss. Self-loss entails the dissolution of the self. People who have lost themselves are not centered, independent persons—they are appendages to other people’s lives. They sacrifice and serve and suffer. Family and friends praise them for their humility, but in reality they are incapable of authentic virtue because they are not integral selves.

Feminist scholars have argued that self-loss rather than pride is the “typical” feminine sin. Valerie Saiving notes, for example, that women are less prone to proud self-assertion than to “triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality; gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason—in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self” (Sailing, 1979, p. 37). According to Judith Plaskow, women most commonly sin by failing to be a self—that is, by refusing to accept the burden of responsible freedom (Plaskow, 1980, p. 66). Susan Nelson Dunfee calls this refusal the sin of “hiding.” She maintains that by relentlessly damning pride, Christian theology has “perpetuated patterns of bondage and repression rather than breaking them” (Dunfee, 1982, p. 317). Women have been made to feel guilty and anxious whenever they assert themselves—even when failing to do so would be irresponsible. According to Dunfee, Christian theol-

ogy must teach that “the call of God to full humanity is the call into freedom to name oneself, to assert one’s selfhood, and to know pride in oneself” (Dunfee, 1982, p. 322).

Perhaps some feminist scholars have overstated their case. Women are socialized to be less self-assertive than males, but pride comes in many forms—not all of which are marked by “masculine” aggressiveness. Nevertheless, feminists have called attention to the way Christians sometimes mistake self-loss for humility. Humility does not exclude self-respect, proper self-esteem, self-love, and feelings of pride.

Sometimes Jesus’ teachings are misinterpreted to mean that Christian discipleship entails the loss of one’s self. Jesus said that people can “save” their lives only by “losing” them (Matt. 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24) and commanded his followers to “deny themselves” and “take up their cross” (Mark 8:34; cf. Matt. 16:24; Luke 9:23). But in these passages, Jesus calls for uncompromised loyalty to the kingdom of God, not the dissolution of the self. Jesus himself modeled what he commanded, and no one could accuse him of being a timid, outer-directed man. When opposed by religious authorities, he refused to back down. When standing before the Sanhedrin and later Pilate, he was self-confident, self-possessed, and properly assertive. Jesus never caved in to the crowd, never groveled before power, never appeased critics. No one who follows Jesus authentically will suffer self-loss.

CULTIVATING HUMILITY

Because humility depends on accurate self-assessment, it requires rigorous and wise self-examination. Rigorous self-examination seeks only truth; it gives no place to ego-saving rationalizations or self-flattery. Unfortunately, human beings do not find such honesty easy. Social psychologist David G. Myers notes that “experiments have revealed that people tend to attribute positive behaviors to themselves and negative behaviors to external factors, enabling them to take credit for their good acts and deny responsibility

for their bad acts” (Myers, 1981, pp. 20-21). This “self-serving bias” usually renders simple introspection harmless against entrenched pride.

As a counterweight to self-serving bias, one might practice the time-honored discipline of confession (cf. James 5:16). The act of disclosing private thoughts and actions to a minister, therapist, or friend leads to new self-understanding. Faults previously shoved to the margins of consciousness become focal. Once easily denied, they take on a stark objectivity that pierces the self-deception on which pride depends. Solomon Schimmel observes,

By honestly confiding our thoughts and behaviors to a trusted mentor, we will become aware of those which derive from or lead to pride or vanity. The spiritual mentor does not listen in order to forgive, but to facilitate self-observation. In confessing sins the shameful inclination to pride is exposed. Often this alone suffices to set us on the path to humility (Schimmel, 1992, p. 45).

Self-serving bias may also be countered by giving appropriate credit to criticisms leveled against us by our enemies. No one monitors our words or deeds more closely than an enemy; no one is quicker to notice when our deeds belie our words. Enemies feel no obligation to protect our self-image with falsehoods. They show no mercy; and, in the process, they do us a mercy by identifying shortcomings to which we are blind. Of course, our enemies are not oracles. They often misconstrue our motives and overlook our virtues. But even one-sided criticism may illuminate a facet of our lives, and, if wisely received, can provide a “reality check” that leads to better self-understanding and authentic humility (Schimmel, 1992, p. 46).

Rigorous self-examination must proceed wisely. It must focus on character rather than socially desirable goods. Too often people appraise themselves in terms of beauty, intelligence, wealth, fame, or success. The result is predictable. Some stack up favorably and become puffed up with pride; others fare

poorly and slide into self-contempt. Therapists and social workers need to help their clients realize that goods like beauty and wealth are superficial. They may be desirable, but they do not elevate a person's worth. Socially desirable goods are usually the result less of personal virtue than of genetic inheritance, fortunate birth, or the benefaction of others.

Serious self-examination is emotionally taxing. It can be painful. No one undertakes it lightly, and most avoid it entirely. Usually it takes a serious set-back—some failure or illness or loss—before people are willing to take a realistic and humbling look at themselves. It is usually during those times of acute stress that people turn to professionals for help. Christian social workers and therapists then have the opportunity to guide their clients into rigorous and wise self-examination.

CONCLUSION

Is pride a “deadly sin”? Yes. Vanity, conceit, and arrogance disrupt and disorder individual lives, families, and communities. Given common confusions, however, Christian social workers and therapists must try to help people understand the true nature of pride and humility. Self-respect, proper self-esteem, self-love, and feelings of pride must not be labeled sin. Sham humility and self-loss must not be reckoned virtues.

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