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THE VICE OF PRIDE

Robert C. Roberts

This paper clarifies the vice of pride by distinguishing it from emotions that are symptomatic of it and from virtuous dispositions that go by the same name, by identifying the disposition (humility) that is its virtue-counterpart, and by distinguishing its kinds. The analysis is aided by the conception of emotions as concern-based construals and the idea that pride can be a dispositional concern of a particular type or family of types.

When Benjamin Franklin was about twenty-four years old (in 1730), he “conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection.”¹ Finding, on initial efforts, that his undertaking was more than could be accomplished by mere resolution and good will, he devised a systematic discipline. He made a list of thirteen virtues (Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility, Chastity, and Humility) “and annexed to each a short precept which fully expressed the extent [he] gave to its meaning.”² For example, the precept associated with Humility was “Imitate Jesus and Socrates.” He then concentrated on one virtue per week, and contrived a chart on which, in the evening of each day, he would mark failures with respect to the virtue of the week. He reckoned that, if he had a whole week clear of failure-marks for the assigned virtue, he could think he had made progress on it and was ready to go on to the next one. He went on to the next virtue in any case, and so gave himself a thirteen-week course. Thus he could repeat the course four times in a year. He comments that, though he never reached moral perfection by this means, he did experience improvement, and expresses the hope that some of his descendents will also profit from his method.

My list of virtues contain'd at first but twelve; but a Quaker friend having kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud; that my pride show'd itself frequently in conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any point, but was overbearing, and rather insolent, of which he convinc'd me by mentioning several instances; I determin'd endeavouring to cure myself, if I could, of this vice or folly among the rest, and I added Humility

¹Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, in *Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings*, selected and ed. with an introduction by L. Jesse Lemisch (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 94.

²*Ibid.*, p. 95.



to my list, giving an extensive meaning to the word. I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue, but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it. I made it a rule to forbear all direct contradiction to the sentiments of others, and all positive assertion of my own. I even forbid myself, agreeably to the old laws of our Junto, the use of every word or expression in the language that imported a fix'd opinion, such as certainly, undoubtedly, etc., and I adopted, instead of them, I conceive, I apprehend, or I imagine a thing to be so or so; or it so appears to me at present.³ When another asserted something that I thought an error, I deny'd myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly, and of showing immediately some absurdity in his proposition; and in answering I began by observing that in certain cases or circumstances his opinion would be right, but in the present case there appear'd or seem'd to me some difference, etc. I soon found the advantage of this change in my manner; the conversations I engag'd in went on more pleasantly. The modest way in which I propos'd my opinions procur'd them a readier reception and less contradiction; I had less mortification when I was found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevail'd with others to give up their mistakes and join with me when I happened to be in the right. And this mode, which I at first put on with some violence to natural inclination, became at length so easy, and so habitual to me, that perhaps for these fifty years past no one has ever heard a dogmatical expression escape me. And to this habit (after my character of integrity) I think it principally owing that I had early so much weight with my fellow-citizens when I proposed new institutions, or alterations in the old, and so much influence in public councils when I became a member; for I was but a bad speaker, never eloquent, subject to much hesitation in my choice of words, hardly correct in language, and yet I generally carried my points. In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history; for, even if I could conceive that I had compleatly overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility.⁴

Pride and Pride

Franklin was an admirable sinner. The friendly Quaker confessor alerted him to his pride, and with commendable willingness to hear hard words about his character, and typical Franklinian enterprise, Ben added this failing to his program of self-reform. But what is pride? I mean, What *sort* of thing is it?

³Franklin gives what appears to be a different account of the genesis of this policy on p. 31, where he seems to be reporting developments that occurred in 1722, when he was about sixteen. See *ibid.*, pp. 30–32.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 103–105.

Franklin takes it to be a “vice or folly,” and thinks that he’d be rid of it if he could just become humble. But pride is often taken to be an emotion, something you feel on a given occasion, say, when your child achieves something wonderful and conspicuous, or your country takes several gold medals at the Olympics. This, evidently, is not the kind of pride that Franklin wants to dispel from his character, though he does mention that, as part of the discipline of overcoming his pride, he would deny himself “the pleasure of contradicting [his interlocutor] abruptly, and of showing immediately some absurdity in his proposition.” The pleasure he denies himself here does seem to be an emotion, and maybe it could be called pride; perhaps the pleasure of a swift and summary refutation was his feeling of pride in besting a dialectical rival, and in thus hammering home his intellectual superiority. But even if so, such pleasure is not exactly what Franklin wants to overcome. Instead, his denying himself this pleasure is instrumental to overcoming the disposition from which it arises. He hopes that quelling the product of his vicious disposition will diminish the disposition by retroaction.

So the pride that he is primarily concerned to extirpate is a disposition or bad “habit,” and not an emotion, though it has emotional expressions or consequences, and some of these expressions may also go by the name of pride. A viciously proud person does sometimes feel pride in a vicious way. But the emotional expressions of pride as a vice are not all pleasant feelings of pride the emotion. Franklin also mentions the hedonic downside of the vice. One’s pride in this sense can be “wounded,” and the wounds can be very unpleasant. In fact, one of the advantages of training himself in a more humble demeanor was that he “had less mortification when [he] was found to be in the wrong.”

Behind both the pleasure and the pain of the pride that Franklin wants to extirpate is a concern, an ongoing dispositional desire, a goal, that is misconceived. He tells us that it comes out in his conversation. He wasn’t “content with being in the right when discussing any point, but was overbearing, and rather insolent.” So what he wanted wasn’t just *truth*, nor even, more egoistically, *being right*. He wanted to triumph over the interlocutor, metaphorically to have his knee on his interlocutor’s neck. He wanted to look down on the defeated asserter and see eyes submissively pleading for mercy—*Ben’s* mercy. He wanted to be the dialectical big man in town and everybody to know it. Thus the pleasure of abrupt contradiction and the *showing* of absurdity in the other’s thought; and the pain, on occasion, when the interlocutor was on top looking down, and everybody there to see it. So what Franklin seems to have wanted, under the title of pride, is domination, and of course the complement of domination is submission. To dominate another is to get submission from him—if in no other way, then in the silent acknowledgment of Franklin’s superiority.

The device that Franklin used in his pride for beating the competitor emotionally into submission was “language that imported a fix’d opinion,” words like ‘certainly,’ ‘undoubtedly,’ ‘any intelligent person would see that . . .,’ ‘one would have to be completely stupid to think that . . .,’ and the like. As Franklin notes, this device is decidedly ill chosen. Pride in this sense is clearly “folly.” You can bet on it that your discussion partner also has a bit of pride, and will take ill to being beaten up in this way.

Even if your argument is watertight and he sees that it is so, he is likely to resist out of sheer perversity if you treat him disrespectfully. So Franklin's personal style, prior to his humility program, was pretty barbarous, and not very well calculated to achieve the submission of his interlocutors. And his method of self-discipline in "humility" was the rather simple one of changing the language he used in debate. He found that a less overtly domineering demeanor, more respectful linguistic behavior toward his interlocutor, yielded an increase in his power over the other's opinions.

Franklin reports that the humility discipline that he imposed on himself required "some violence to natural inclination," but eventually became easy and habitual, so that he had virtually complete success in rooting out "dogmatical expression" from his speech. But he also distinguishes the appearance of humility from "the reality of this virtue," admitting that his success was more with the appearance, and ends the passage by saying that perhaps "no one of our natural passions [is] so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself."

So pride is more than pleasure in the oppressive use of dogmatical expressions, and humility more than modesty of assertion. In this last, rather despairing comment about the ineradicability of pride, Franklin echoes Christianity and sounds a bit quaint to modern ears. To our contemporaries, 'pride' is more likely to name a virtue than a vice. If we are to affirm the ancient teaching that seems to inform Franklin's thought despite its utilitarian tone, we must sort good pride from the vice.

Virtue or Vice?

When a child is proud of her father's skill or a father of his kids' accomplishments, pride can be healthy and admirable. A child who is ashamed of her father or indifferent to her father's accomplishments seems, for that at least, less well. These cases of pride seem to be a proper bonding, corollaries of love. The father's heart is bonded to the child by the awareness that his daughter is proud of him, and the child's heart is bonded to her father by the knowledge that her dad is proud of her. Those who think all pride vicious may think the right emotion not pride but admiration, because pride has ego in it that admiration lacks. But just because admiration lacks reference to self, admiration of her father would not do the same job of bonding.

The self-reference in pride can also lend health to a deflated self. The poor black teenager who is proud of the accomplishments of Louis Armstrong or Michael Jordan or Toni Morrison enjoys a mitigation of an erosive discouragement, a prop in the edifice of his dignity and self-respect. Self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect are dispositional attitudes in the neighborhood of pride but are not vicious. Patriotism is a kind of pride, and may be a virtue. 'Pride' is an ambiguous term, and as far as I can tell, always has been.

Despite the centrality of pride in the Christian tradition's discussion of sin, the New Testament has no fixed term for it, and does not seem to give the idea a central place. In Romans 11.20 Paul says, "do not become proud

(ὕψηλὰ φρονεῖν), but stand in awe." In 12.16 he says, "do not be haughty (ὕψηλὰ φρονούυυτες), but associate with the lowly; never be conceited (φρόνιμοι παρ'ἑαυτοῖς)." "Love . . . is not boastful (περπερεύομαι), it is not proud (φυσιοῦται)" (I Corinthians 13.4); "Knowledge puffs up (φυσιοῖ), love builds up" (I Corinthians 8.1); and in II Corinthians Paul struggles with his inclination to boast (καυχάομαι). I Timothy 6.17 says, "as for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty (ὕψηλοφρονεῖν)." Paul prefaces his discussion of humility in Philippians 2 by saying "do nothing from selfishness (ἐριθεία) or conceit (κενοδοξία)." The thinness of the New Testament's conceptualization of the vice(s) of pride, along with the fact that the English 'pride' also names some good emotion types or dispositions, suggests that it is useful, in analyzing 'pride,' to find the more evaluatively specific terms for which it substitutes. For example, 'arrogance,' 'snobbishness,' and 'domination' for vicious pride and 'self-respect,' 'self-confidence,' and 'dignity' for virtuous pride.

Pride turns out to be several vices, and individuals may be more afflicted with one than with another. Franklin's main problem, in the passage quoted, seems to have been with domination, the desire to subject others to oneself, to receive submission from them, for the sake of feeling big and powerful in comparison. Perhaps when Franklin comments about the difficulty of eradicating pride, he has in mind that while his program of virtue-acquisition has made him more genteel in the *ways* he dominates others, he is still concerned to dominate them. Getting the other to acknowledge defeat in debate is *one* way of getting submission from him or her. Another is to have had a significant influence in the formation of the other's mind and life. We may see this too in Franklin's autobiography, which is punctuated by accounts of the various institutions that he invented or initiated, and the influence these have had on the American people. But it is sometimes very hard to distinguish a questionable prideful joy of being the author of another's mind from a generous joy in the other's flourishing. Most people's generosity, I would judge, is tainted with a bit of the vicious motive.

Of course, it is often important for one person to dominate another. Parents need to dominate their children, and organizations require chains of command, and the wise may need to dominate the foolish for the latter's (and everyone's) good. The kind of pride that such benign domination requires might be called 'authority' or 'leadership.' These are instrumental dominations, and one avoids the vice of domination as long as the subject's structure of desire reflects this instrumentality. Nelson Mandela and George Washington exercised their domination through political office. That they did so not predominantly out of a desire for power but out of a desire for the public good is suggested by the fact that they relinquished their power at the appointed time. Compare these men with the countless others who have been unwilling to resign power, once in office, and have sought to become "presidents for life," and the like.

In addition to domination, arrogance, vanity, and conceit, other vices belonging to the pride family are egotism, hyper-autonomy, grandiosity, pretentiousness, snobbery, impertinence or presumption, haughtiness, self-righteousness, selfish ambition, and self-complacency. Each of these can be analyzed for its vicious elements, but all have something or other to

do with the inordinate prominence of the self in an individual's thinking, caring, and action.⁵ 'Inordinate' may suggest "too much," but in discussions of vice, more usually it needs to mean something like "wrong kind." A great deal of prominence of the self is compatible with humility, if the prominence is of the right kind. And all these vices seem to be, in their own ways, opposite to humility. One thing we are saying when we identify non-vicious kinds of pride like the ones I mentioned at the beginning of this section is that they don't fall in any of the above vice categories, and that they are compatible with humility.

In Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, the narrator's aunt Emily has a serious talk with him concerning his irresponsibility and moral laxity. She appeals to his pride, in the sense of self-respect. The conversation raises questions about self-respect and humility, since she is commending to him a kind of self-respect that involves regarding oneself as better than other people. The case is analytically interesting because such comparison rides dangerously close to the edge of vicious pride:

I'll make you a little confession. I am not ashamed to use the word class. I will also plead guilty to another charge. The charge is that people belonging to my class think they're better than other people. You're damn right we're better. We're better because we do not shirk our obligations either to ourselves or to others. We do not whine. We do not organize a minority group and blackmail the government. We do not prize mediocrity for mediocrity's sake.⁶

If Aunt Emily is not viciously proud, how is this to be explained? She has a relatively high opinion of herself, but does not seem to be arrogant, if we take arrogance to be a disposition to infer some illicit entitlement from a supposition of one's superiority,⁷ nor conceited, if we take conceit to be the set of dispositions of thought, action, and emotion that stem from an unwarrantedly high opinion of oneself. She may well be right about her superiority, and she's not inferring any illicit entitlement from it.

She might seem snobbish, since she frankly admits that she considers herself to be better than certain people in an important respect, and looks down on them therefore with a certain contempt. If we try to think of a way of being snobbish without being vicious, we might define snobbishness simply as thinking oneself better than other people in some important respect. But this is not what 'snobbish' usually means. Snobbery is an attitude of *illegitimate* contempt toward other people, and involves behaving toward them in illegitimately exclusive ways. Thus the judgment that so-and-so does not play the cello up to the standards of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and so we should exclude him from the orchestra, does not amount to snobbishness. If he's been trying to foist himself on

⁵Quick analyses of several of the above vices are given in Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 236–237, and we give more extensive analysis of vanity, arrogance, and domination in the chapter on humility, pp. 236–256.

⁶Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 195.

⁷See *ibid.*, p. 243.

the orchestra despite his klutzy cello playing, the selection committee may even feel some legitimate contempt for him. But it *would* be snobbish to exclude him because he is a social bumpkin and speaks English with a backwoods accent. Other forms of illegitimate exclusivity are like snobbishness but have specific names such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia; these too might be regarded as vicious forms of pride. By these standards for snobbishness, nothing in the quotation indicates that Aunt Emily is snobbish.

We are not told how Aunt Emily would explain her superiority to those she criticizes. If she explains that she, by the grace of providence, had the benefit of a proper upbringing of which the yahoos may have been deprived, she would escape also the accusation of self-righteousness. On the other hand, she would fall under this condemnation if she insisted that her uprightness is her own doing and the yahoos are as culpable of their degeneracy as she is praiseworthy for her righteousness.

She might be humble even in her politically incorrect statement, if she does not take a certain *kind* of pleasure in being better than the people she compares herself with—if, for example, she would welcome everybody's being like her. A kind of pleasure in superiority that is contrary to humility is what we might call "invidious" pleasure, a pleasure that focuses not on the substance of her superiority (which she sketches in the above quotation), but on the superiority *as superiority*. She does take some kind of pleasure in not being like those others, but that pleasure may not be of a kind to vitiate her humility. For example, she is not glad that her nephew is irresponsible and morally lax, and thus is not glad that he comes off so badly in comparison with her. She is glad not to be like him, but not glad that he is not like her. If her attitude towards her nephew is duplicated in her attitude toward everybody, then her judgment of her superiority indicates no vicious pride. We could say that she is proud, all right, but not viciously so. She does not take joy in the fact that there are people inferior to herself in the detailed respects, but finds this transparently regrettable. We might call her pride dignity, rather than self-righteousness or snobbery.

What if the Pharisee had said not "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18.11), but instead, "God, I pray thee that the extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and this tax collector may become like me"? Jesus' moral assessments of some Pharisees suggest that this way of putting the matter would also be a symptom of self-righteousness, even if it does not express contempt for the tax collector as the original formula does. Self-righteousness is a kind of vicious pride, but it depends on a factual premise: that the subject is in fact not righteous. Jesus himself no doubt wished that the sinners should be more like himself; but in him, this does not amount to self-righteousness. Aunt Emily might be right in all her claims to moral superiority and would not become "Pharisaic" unless she were wrong about something in her moral claims—say, that she was more in God's favor than the deadbeats, on account of her being such a responsible citizen.

I have argued for years that, for purposes of moral psychology, it is helpful to think of emotions as concern-based construals,⁸ and I think this

⁸For example, in *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). I apply the account to several Christian virtues

construction can help us distinguish vicious from virtuous pride. A concern-based construal is a kind of concerned perceptual grasp of a situation in which the elements of the situation are organized according to some paradigm. The elements in the pride paradigm are something worthy of praise and its being mine. Thus the child who is proud of her father's skill construes the skill as *worthy of praise*, and construes the man who possesses this skill as *my father*. Both of these elements need to be in the picture for the emotion to be an instance of pride. If the child does not construe her father's skill as worthy of praise, she will not be proud of it; and if she does not construe the man as in some sense belonging to her, she may admire or envy the skill, but she will not be proud of it. Of course she need not construe the man specifically as her father. She might construe him as *her friend*, *her brother*, *her countryman*, or *her teacher*; but she must somehow positively associate the worthy thing with herself. Pride has a necessary self-reference, and this is the element that most famously qualifies it as potentially vicious.

I have also pointed out that these perceptual "takes" on situations are concern-based. The subject cares about the elements in the situation, and this caring is integrated into the perception. In the current example, the child cares about her father's skill, thus seeing it as a good thing; and she also cares about her father's connection to herself, thus seeing the worthiness of her father's skill as enhancing her own worth, reflecting well on herself. In the most virtuous form of this child's pride, the child's bond to her father—the psychological explanation of *how* the father belongs to her—is her love for him, which is the entanglement of her father's interests with her own. Thus the "self" that is enhanced by the father's skill is, for the child, not just the child's, but the father's as well.

Compare this *mine* with the egoistic *mine* of Franklin's early pleasure in barbarous dialectical domination of his fellows. Here we have variation in the *character* of the *mine*. He feels proud after slam-dunking an interlocutor because he sees dialectical triumph/defeat of a competitor/the subjection of the interlocutor as worthy of praise; and it is attributable to himself: *I, Ben, did it*. Although the *mine* element figures in both of these examples of the emotion of pride, it differs considerably in character. In the child case its selfishness is muted by the child's identification with her father, and that identification itself is virtuous. The child's pride is an expression of filial excellence. In the Franklin case, the egoism in the *mine* is rampant and socially destructive.

The *mine* can also be differentially *stressed*. In one pride construal the stress can fall more on the fact that the worthy thing is mine, and in another on the fact that it is worthy. In the latter kind of case pride shades into admiration, and we probably tend to think of the cases in which the stress is less on the *mine* and more on the *worthy* as having less vice potential. Because pride as an emotion is a construal, the *mine* element can vary, from one instance of the emotion type to another, in emphasis and character, thus yielding instances that fall on different sides of the virtue/vice divide.

Pride can also vary evaluatively with variation in the *worthy* element. The child's pride might be vicious, despite expressing love, in case what the child construes as worthy in the father is unworthy. For example, if the child were proud of her father's prowess at humiliating interlocutors, it would be a vicious emotion even though it helps to bond her with her father. I suppose we could say that it is vicious in one respect and virtuous in another.

"Imitate Jesus"

Franklin affixes to his virtue of humility a precept that "fully expresses" the extent of its meaning: "Imitate Jesus and Socrates." The humility of Socrates is an interesting subject that I will not explore here. But I do think the humility of Jesus, and more broadly the concept of humility that seems to operate in the New Testament, will throw some light on the nature of pride as a vice. One important way to analyze a vice is to identify carefully its virtue counterpart. Various accounts of humility have been offered within and without the Christian tradition, and I will offer one that I think is the dominant New Testament concept, which I think will make sense of, or correct, the various other accounts. Some have thought humility to be a disposition to low self-assessment, low self-esteem.⁹ From Hume, for example, one gets the impression, if not the idea, that humility is a kind of shame or self-contempt.¹⁰ One recent writer has made modesty (which is perhaps similar to humility) a dogmatic self-underestimation.¹¹ One sees this tendency also in some Christian writers, some popular medieval spirituality handbooks¹² and also in Jonathan Edwards,¹³ where humility may blend into penitence. Aquinas thinks of humility as a disposition of restraint of inordinate ambition, a check on the desire to be something above what you are. More recent secular writers tend to see humility as moderate or accurate self-assessment—a self-evaluation that neither over- nor underestimates one's worth.¹⁴

⁹See Walter MacDougall, *Character and the Conduct of Life* (London: Methuen Publishers, 1927), p. 129.

¹⁰See *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), Book II, Part 1. "by *pride* I understand that agreeable impression, which arises in the mind, when the view either of our virtue, beauty, riches or power makes us satisfy'd with ourselves: And . . . by *humility* I mean the opposite impression" (p. 297). "According as our idea is more or less advantageous, we feel either of those opposite affections, and are elated by pride, or dejected by humility" (p. 277). "every cause of pride, by its peculiar qualities, produces a separate pleasure, and of humility a separate uneasiness" (p. 285). "Thus pride is a pleasant sensation, and humility a painful" (p. 286).

¹¹Julia Driver, "The Virtues of Ignorance," *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 373–384.

¹²See Walter Hilton, *The Stairway of Perfection*, trans. M. L. Del Mastro (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), p. 81.

¹³"Love to God, as it exalts him, tends to low thoughts and estimates of ourselves, and leads to a deep sense of unworthiness and our desert of ill" (*Charity and Its Fruits* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978], p. 79).

¹⁴"[H]umility consists, roughly, in having oneself and one's accomplishments in perspective" (Norvin Richards, *Humility* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992], p. 188). See also Nancy Snow, "Humility," in *Personal Virtues*, ed. Clifford

In the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth is the paradigm exemplar of humility, and the model held up for imitation by his followers. In the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians, Paul says

Do nothing out of selfish ambition (κατὰ ἐριθείαν) or vain conceit (κατὰ κευδοξίαν), but in humility (τῇ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ) consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself (ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτόν) and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (vv.3–8)

Since Paul also holds Christ to be without sin, Paul must distinguish strictly between humility and penitence. The identification of humility with low self-esteem is also out, since knowing oneself to be in the form of God is not compatible with a low estimate of one's personal value. Indeed, in another paradigm New Testament passage for Christ's being the model of humility, he explicitly claims to be the Lord and Master of those who are to imitate him. The passage is from the 13th chapter of John's Gospel:

When he had finished washing [the disciples'] feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (vv.12–17)

This passage is a narrative illustration of Paul's point. Without being *ignorant* of his exalted status, Jesus does not "insist" on it. He is willing to *ignore* it for the sake of ministering to his disciples. His lack of personal concern about his status vis-à-vis others stands in stark contrast with the hyper-concern and hyper-awareness of status that prevails among his disciples.¹⁵

Williams (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 73–89, where she makes out humility to be a proper sense of one's limitations where 'sense' implies an emotional acceptance of such—either as an individual in comparison with other individuals ("narrow humility") or as a human being in relation to the universe ("existential humility").

¹⁵I have suggested that 'dignity' and 'self-respect' identify kinds of virtuous pride. While Jesus is willing to "ignore" his personal importance for the sake of his ministry, he nevertheless exhibits an understated dignity in his demeanor worthy of the Son of God. Even while washing the disciples' feet or dying on the cross, he acts with an underlying authority and dignity that might be called pride.

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him, with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20.20–28)

I have suggested, in my few remarks on these passages, that the concept of humility here is the concept of a trait marked by the *absence of a certain kind of concern or of concerned attention*. The humble person is one who easily, even automatically, puts his personal importance or social status out of mind for the sake of some important project or goal or other concern. He may be perfectly well informed and accurate in his judgment of his status/importance (high *or* low), but the essential thing is that his status/importance does not preoccupy him. The apostle Paul, for a contrasting example, struggles for humility without always succeeding. He sometimes finds himself letting his personal concern for his status among the apostles, his leadership in the churches, get entangled (confused) with the work to which he has been called. He struggles with "boasting" and gives lists of his qualifications, accomplishments, and sufferings. This point is not unambiguously clear, because others' recognition of Paul's status as an apostle may be crucial to his work as an apostle, and *this* kind of concern for his status/importance is compatible with humility. But I think it is natural to read the passages about boasting as expressing a struggle with himself about a non-instrumental concern for his importance that Paul regards as a personal spiritual problem.

We don't have a lot of material on the inner life of John the Baptist, but he appears in one passage as an excellent exemplar of humility, in the sense that I think is at work in the passages I have quoted.

Now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a Jew over purifying. And they came to John, and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan [Jesus], to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices

greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3.25–30)

John has been a center of intense admiring and anxious attention by the people. He is revered as a prophet, and has disciples of his own. Now as Jesus comes on the scene, ready to begin his public ministry, we might expect John to be at least ambivalent, if not outright envious, as Jesus eclipses him. But such is his love for Jesus and for the kingdom that Jesus is bringing in, that John is not just willing, in a grudging way, to give up the limelight, but rejoices with a joy that is "complete." In a discourse on this passage¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard stresses John's "humble self-denial," seeming to make the object of John's joy his own self-abnegation. This would suggest that, like Paul, John struggled against pride, but perhaps unlike Paul, succeeded and took pleasure in denying himself for Jesus' sake. But this does not seem to me the natural reading of the passage. We have no evidence that John denies himself the pleasure of prominence, much less that his joy is about denying himself. Instead, it looks to me as though John rejoices simply in the advent of the kingdom that he has been heralding, and is unconcerned about his own fading into the background. What is extraordinary about him, in regard to humility and pride, is that his importance and prominence, which now "must decrease," is *not an issue for him*.

How does the non-insistence analysis of humility relate to the various other accounts that we have mentioned? I have already commented that Jesus cannot be an exemplar of humility if we think of humility as low self-esteem, but the equanimity that the humble person exhibits about status and prominence, which would also entail low anxiety about certain kinds of low self-evaluations, would suggest that the humble person is *freer to make low self-estimates*, when such are called for, than the proud person. Proud people are anxious about their importance, and such anxiety can easily lead to distortions of judgment. Pride can make one defensive against proper shame, and humility may accordingly be positively associated with shame in being a kind of openness to proper shame. But pride itself can also generate shame; caring about status and importance in the way the proud person does makes one vulnerable to slights, belittlements, and humblings to which the humble person is emotionally less pervious. Remember Franklin's reference to his "mortifications when [he] was found to be in the wrong." Those who make humility a matter of accurate self-assessment may thus be credited with having identified one of the important *consequences* of humility. As to the contemporary writers who see humility as moderate self-assessment, the non-insistence view of humility would deny that humility is any particular self-assessment; humility is, on the contrary, compatible with both very high (e.g., Christ) and very low self-assessment.

Aquinas's account differs from the above views, making humility a "restraining" factor. He says that, "with regard to the difficult good" we need a virtue "to restrain and temper the mind, lest it tend to high things

¹⁶Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 275–291.

immoderately; and this belongs to the virtue of humility" (*ST* 2a2æ, Q161, art.1, *responsio*). "Humility restrains the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason" (*ST* 2a2æ, Q161, art.1, reply 3). "it belongs properly to humility, that a man restrain himself from being borne towards that which is above him" (*ST* 2a2æ, Q161, art.2, *responsio*).¹⁷ If we think of Jesus as having some factor in his personality that is "restraining" him from insisting on his divine status, we would still not have quite what Aquinas envisions here, since presumably Jesus would not be guilty of any immoderation or violation of right reason if he did insist on it. But there is perhaps a restraining factor in Jesus' case nevertheless, for it seems reasonable to suppose that he "empties himself" *out of* love for humankind and in particular the project of redeeming us. His not insisting on his divine status is part of the salvation-strategy. But this restraining factor would not seem to be humility, but rather the different virtue of charity. My reading of the John the Baptist case is that John's love of the kingdom dispels any concern he might otherwise have about being overshadowed by the greater Jesus. There is perhaps also some ambiguity in Question 161, evident in the above quotations, as to whether the humble agent actively restrains the urge to overreach, or whether the restraint is accomplished by humility without need for the agent's active intervention. Paul struggles to suppress his pride, but John seems not to exercise any restraint. This is why John seems to be more humble than Paul, a better imitator of Jesus. Of course, John enjoys the advantage of our knowing far less about his inner life than we know of Paul's.

So What Is Pride?

Franklin thinks that the cure for pride is well pursued by imitating Jesus, and in this he voices a very biblical and Pauline principle. But oddly enough, the particular behavioral advice that he gives under this head is not reminiscent of Jesus. Jesus does not avoid "language that import[s] a fix'd opinion," nor does he ever, to my knowledge, preface his assertions with "I conceive, I apprehend, or I imagine a thing to be so or so," or any like expression of self-effacing tentativeness. He is not humble in that sense. He is not polite. He is much more likely to say "Verily, I say to you, . . ." or tell you you're a hypocrite or a whitewashed tomb. Franklin's reformed way of speaking is more reminiscent of Socrates than of Jesus, who was positive, direct, and often even abrasive. Socrates did get himself in hot water by wounding people's pride, but as far as I know he never got overtly harsh in the way Jesus sometimes was. If Jesus' character is to be measured by his speech, he might well be thought to suffer from the vice of pride.

But Franklin too does not think that pride consists simply in haughty abruptness of speech. Despite his near-perfect success in making his language more politic, he professes despair about overcoming his pride. "In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as

¹⁷The translation is by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1981).

much as one pleases, it is still alive." Franklin is not a traditional Christian, but in this *cri de coeur* he sounds a characteristic note from the Christian tradition. I have tried in this paper to help him out in clarifying the concept of pride as a vice, and I have proposed and briefly exemplified three devices to that end.

One device is to look at the structure of pride as an emotion type for clues about how instances of the type might be virtuous or vicious. Here we found two elements in pride as a concern-based construal—the *worthy* and the *mine*—and saw briefly how each of these elements, through the conception of it and the concern about it that took the shape of that conception, might lend vice or virtue to instances of the type. This provided a way of explaining why the child's pride in her father's skill might be virtuous while Franklin's pride in his dialectical performances was vicious.

A second device is to try to get a bit clearer on the nature of the virtue of which pride is the vice-counterpart, and I have proposed that the New Testament concept of humility is that of a special kind of obliviousness, a kind of systematic inattention and non-caring. I have called it humility as non-insistence—in particular, non-insistence, non-caring, non-emphasis, inattention, about issues of one's own *importance*, one's own social *status*, one's own *greatness*, particularly as the concern for and attention to these may be pushed aside or dimmed by some overriding concern or project, such as the salvation of the human race or the kingdom of God. (But the project supporting humility might be smaller, or a smaller part of the last, such as rearing some healthy children or improving the minds and hearts of one's students.) The yield of this second device would seem to be that pride is a hyper-concern for status, for social importance, for greatness and honor, and a hyper-attention to these things. But it is a special sort of hyper-concern for them. It is just conceivable that someone might be very concerned for his social status in a purely instrumental way, and thus humble despite being extremely concerned with his own importance. He might think, for example, that it is important for him to be thought important, because his being honored is crucial to the accomplishment of the good (the kingdom of God, the education of the youth, the promotion of justice). Usually such a rationale for concerning oneself with status is a rationalization of the deeper desire simply to be honored for being great. It is a fig leaf for pride.

A third device I have offered for clarifying pride as a vice is to divide it into its distinct subspecies: domination, arrogance, vanity, conceit, egotism, hyper-autonomy, grandiosity, pretentiousness, snobbery, impertinence or presumption, haughtiness, self-righteousness, selfish ambition, self-complacency, and who knows what else. I brought this device to bear as a way of unconfusing innocuous or good pride, such as dignity, self-respect, and authority, from pride the vice(s). If the result of the second device is sound, then it will have uncovered a theme that runs through the list of the sub-vices of pride. These will all be vices because they all involve, in one way or another, a hyper-concern for one's own greatness, importance, and honor (and pride that is not a vice will lack this feature). But if they are really all distinct sub-vices, then identifying the theme will be only the beginning of the philosophical-ethical analysis of the vice of pride. (This paper has done very little in that direction.) One can see that there are quite a few ways

of being pridefully vicious, various colorations of seeing oneself and the social world through the lens of hyper-concern for the size of self, multiple permutations of prideful behavior-patterns, and diverse patterns of possible social havoc and ungodliness. If this third device is well conceived, a proper clarification of the vice of pride would be more the work of a book than of an essay. In the book one would find analyses and illustrations of the many varieties of pride and explorations of the ways they interact and support one another; and all of this would be set constantly in contrast with the virtue of humility as various kinds of absence: absence of the concerned attention, and absence of the characteristic ways of thinking and action that form and flow from such concerned attention.

Pride was something of an afterthought in Ben Franklin's campaign against the vice and folly in his life. In fact, it had to be brought to his attention by his kindly Friend. But once the idea of attacking it occurred to him, he ran with it, in his own utilitarian, deistic, self-reliant sort of way. His discussion of it occupies more space in his autobiography than any of the other vices. He seems pretty proud that he rid himself so thoroughly of dogmatical expressions, but the dismay at his defeat by pride itself suggests an inkling of deeper, more traditional Christian thought, something like a recognition of the bondage to sin—a paradoxical insight that fits better with the precept "imitate Jesus."¹⁸

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