



A Matter of Pride

Pride is a critical element in human affairs. Depending on both quantity and quality, it can either be a kill or a cure. Here we analyse this most perplexing emotion. The overriding question is whether it is deserved . . .

□ Pride has a bad reputation. The Bible says that it is "hateful in the eyes of God and man." The Good Book also warns, in a much-misquoted phrase, that "pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." When St. Gregory the Great drew up his list of the seven deadly sins in the 6th century A.D., he placed pride at the very top.

You will look long and hard for a good word about pride in the Oxford Dictionary, which gives as its first definition, "Unduly high opinion of one's own qualities, merits, etc.; arrogant bearing or conduct." Only after it has noted that "pride of place" is "exalted position, consciousness of this, arrogance," does the dictionary concede that pride might have anything going for it. *Proper* pride, it tells us, is a "sense of what befits one's position, preventing one from doing [an] unworthy thing."

All of which gets us only so far as to conclude that pride must be one of the most ambiguous words in the language. If it is such an evil, why, we may ask, have we been urged from childhood to take pride in ourselves and our associations — our family, community, nation, etc.?

What is this thing called pride? Or is it really two things, one a poison and one a tonic to the human spirit? Let us look at the negative side first, since pride is more often condemned than not in the accumulated wisdom of mankind.

It is easy to see why pride should be frowned upon in religious circles. If there is one concept common to all creeds, it is that the individual must

humble himself before the eternal and almighty; as the Book of Ecclesiasticus put it, "Pride was not made for men." Hence the overweening pride that raises the individual above anything and anybody else is intrinsically deplorable. One need not be religious to recognize this. In their family and other close relationships, people who think of themselves as supreme beings can cause endless trouble and pain.

Egomaniacs are not, of course, the only ones whose pride can play havoc with their personal lives. It can happen to anyone. When pride gains the upper hand, it raises near-insurmountable barriers between otherwise reasonable human beings. The psychiatrists and marriage counsellors of today may have a fancier word for it, but pride is the culprit in many of the problems that are brought to their doors.

The trouble with pride in our intimate relationships is that one person's pride may clash with another's. Attacks on a person's self-esteem invariably invite counter-attacks. Anyone who has ever been in a serious lover's quarrel knows what a hurtful game the tit-for-tat pricking of pride can deteriorate into. In this context, Carl Sandburg struck a true note when he warned: "Look out when you use proud words/When you let proud words go, it is not easy to call them back./They wear long boots, hard boots."

Jane Austen understood; she did not name her immortal novel *Pride and Prejudice* for nothing. In it, the two principal characters discover that

when they overcome their pride, their troublesome prejudices are subdued. As with individuals, so with groups. Pride breeds the prejudices that pit them senselessly against one another. In the epic family feuds of the Scottish Highlands, Sicily and the American hill country of the Hatfields and McCoys, two members of the opposing clans might lay eyes on each other only once — when they tried to kill each other. Such is the blindness of pride.

More generally, pride is what makes some people think that they are inherently better than others, and to despise those “others” merely because of their race, nationality, social class, or religion. It is the germ of bigotry, one of the worst conditions to afflict the human race. Nations have been torn apart by the hatred bigotry engenders. It has even led to that ultimate breakdown in civilization, global war.

In her aptly-titled book *The Proud Tower*, Barbara Tuchman told of how stubborn national pride put an end to the benign *belle époque* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Germans at the turn of the century regarded themselves as superior to any other nationality in culture, science, and military prowess. This did not sit well, to say the least, with the French, who were convinced that *they* were superior in such matters. The French, moreover, were still smarting from the humiliation of their defeat at the hands of the Germans in the War of 1870. They tended to see this as an historical aberration that must be redressed.

“There is such a thing as a man too proud to fight”

Puffed up with the nationalistic vainglory of his generation, the French author Charles Péguy wrote in 1910: “When a great war or a great revolution breaks out it is because a great people, a great race, needs to break out, because it has had enough, particularly enough of peace.” Soon a great war did break out, and poor Péguy, who had once written a chauvinistic biography of Joan of Arc, became a victim of his own patriotic ardour. He was killed in the battle of the Marne in 1914.

National pride had filled the powder keg, and it was national pride that exploded it. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was outraged when a Serbian fanatic shot and killed the heir to its throne. Little Serbia’s own pride would not permit it to accede to Austria-Hungary’s bullying ultimatum in the aftermath of the assassination. And so 10 million people were killed, 20 million were wounded, and the political map of the world was changed for all time.

Amidst the strut and clamour of the early years of World War I, a lonely voice of reason was raised. “There is such a thing as a man too proud to fight. There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right,” said United States President Woodrow Wilson. Still, Wilson’s efforts to keep his nation out of the conflict ended in failure. The chief reason was that, by insisting on the right to torpedo U.S. ships trading with the allies, the Germans fatally insulted American national pride.

When pride and humility come together, the result is dignity

Wilson did, though, succeed in putting his finger on the paradox of pride, which is that the stronger it is, the less it needs to be exercised. A person endowed with plenty of the right kind of pride can afford a measure of humility. “As if true pride were not also humble!” exclaimed Robert Browning. Montaigne concurred: “One can be humble out of pride.”

When pride and humility merge, the result is dignity. Dignified people are able to turn the other cheek; indeed, their dignity sometimes will permit them to do nothing else. Dignity is resilient: It can bend without snapping, allowing its possessors to defer effortlessly to others. It stands up well against adversity and misfortune: An experience that might be a crushing humiliation to others is, to a dignified person, merely a signal to start over

and do better. When Johannes Brahms's First Piano Concerto was booed at its premiere performance, the composer was duly disappointed. But he wrote to a friend: "I honestly think this is the best thing that could have happened. It forces me to buckle down, and it builds up courage."

"Though pride is not a virtue, it is the parent of many other virtues," wrote M. C. Collins. It fills this role by making it gratifying to have other traits of character that are admirable in themselves — traits like integrity, courage, diligence and generosity. To be proud of one's own good qualities is both normal and justified. As the wise and sometimes cynical old courtier the Duc de La Rochefoucauld incisively observed: "It is as proper to be proud of ourselves as it is improper to proclaim it to the world."

Give thanks that people are proud enough not to run wild

This inner pride is the enforcer of self-imposed standards of character. It lessens the need for laws and conventions to dictate what one should and should not do. If there were no self-imposed standards, if all human behaviour had to be governed by legal or social strictures, society would be in a shambles. We should be thankful that most people have sufficient pride in themselves to prevent them from running wild.

Standards of character and honesty go together. Fair and trustworthy conduct comes naturally to people who are too proud of their reputation to put themselves in a bad light. Truly proud people do not break promises; they cannot. Their pride will not permit them to go back on their word.

Similarly, people with high standards of character are loath to do less than their best in their personal and working lives. This is most readily apparent in what is known as pride of craftsmanship. It prevents men and women from doing inferior work if they can help it. It too is related to honesty — to the concept of a good day's work for a good day's pay.

Craftsmanship is a word that evokes visions of violin makers, silversmiths, jewellers and the like, but it need not be confined to exquisite handiwork. It can flourish in homes, in offices, in factories, in schools. It has less to do with the nature of a job than with the care and effort that go into it. A housewife who keeps her home immaculate may take as much pride in her work as the most highly-skilled artisan — and so she should.

Unlike the craftsmen of old, however, modern workers rarely have the opportunity to make a product from start to finish. Their efforts are usually directed towards providing the bits and pieces that go into a product or putting them together in the end. Still, pride in work can survive in any atmosphere provided the individual worker has a craftsmanlike attitude. "I never felt as if I had to back out the door with my paycheck," a foundry worker recently said when he retired.

"Be a cobbler, but be the best in London," a man is said to have advised his son. The reason for striving for excellence in your work, whatever it may be, is a harmlessly selfish one. It is that to do a job surpassingly well generates a pleasurable glow of pride — what young people would call a "high" nowadays. On the other hand, it is an emotional let-down to turn out work that you know is not as good as it could be.

In the world of organizations, however, it is sometimes difficult to summon up pride in one's own work if there is no collective pride in the organization. It is a key task of good management to conduct the organization's affairs in a way of which its people can be proud. People seem to have a collective need to identify with something bigger than themselves; even rebels will band together in movements. And they want to be able to point to that identification with pride.

Collective pride resembles pride of craftsmanship in that it arises from doing something well, but it takes the form of doing something well together with others rather than individually. It is pride in one's colleagues as much as in oneself. Another difference is that it is anything but quiet pride — it is indeed proclaimed to the world.

It is at its most spectacular in military units, in which its presence or absence may mean life or death. "We had a good soldierly conceit of ourselves," Field Marshal Sir William Slim wrote of the unit he commanded at the outset of World War II, the 10th Indian Division. To this thoughtful general was handed the challenge of restoring the morale of the British and Indian troops who had taken a savage mauling from the seemingly invincible Japanese Army in Burma. He did so by nurturing their collective pride.

Recognizing its Janus faces and its power of destruction

In his memoirs, *Defeat Into Victory*, Slim articulately told of how his troops' confidence in themselves rose to the point where they went out and tore a determined and resourceful enemy to pieces. "I do not say that the men of the Fourteenth Army welcomed difficulties, but they took a fierce pride in overcoming them by determination and ingenuity," he wrote.

One feature of martial pride is pride in appearance, which explains the spit and polish and parades that recruits find so onerous. It is an interesting point that when people lose their pride, their appearance is usually the next thing to go. A film director seeking instant identification of a character who has gone to seed would, as a matter of course, dress him shabbily and untidily and make sure that he was rather dirty. So pride in appearance is more than vanity; it is a necessary preservative of self-respect.

The Skid Rows and red light districts of this world are full of people who have lost their self-respect, which can be defined as personal pride within reason. W. Somerset Maugham frequently wrote about such specimens — drunkards, beachcombers, remittance men, prostitutes. Maugham recognized the Janus face of pride. In his short

story "The Back of Beyond," we find an older man advising a younger one to try to subordinate his feelings and go on living with the wife who had been unfaithful to him. A chronically unhappy man himself, Maugham nevertheless understood that happiness can be destroyed by either too little or too much personal pride.

It is not only a question of quantity but of quality. The degree of quality depends on whether it is justified, not in your own eyes, but in those of your peers. We are all acquainted with people who have an elevated opinion of themselves which is not deserved by objective standards. Self-delusion is one of pride's most noxious side-effects. To avoid it we should ask ourselves: What have I done to be so proud?

A hazardous substance to be carefully watched

Material success alone does not provide a valid answer. On the contrary, if success is achieved through the kind of single-minded drive that precludes the feelings of others, it may be nothing to be proud of at all. When it is too self-centred, pride is at best ridiculous and at worst disastrous. It is at its best when it takes in a much broader picture than one's own head.

But collective pride is not necessarily a good thing either. It too must be deserved. Being born into a certain family in a certain community of a certain religion or race is not in itself anything to be proud of. *Belonging* to a family, a community, a country, a religion and race — and playing a useful role in furthering its best interests — is a real reason to be proud.

Pride should be treated, then, as a sort of hazardous substance, dangerous in excess or if it is not of the best quality. It has to be weighed and analysed from time to time. The acid test of whether it is a force for good or ill in your life is whether you have earned it. If you can honestly say that you have, then you are entitled to all the pride you can hold.