

## THE POWER OF PRIDE: VICE OR VIRTUE?

By Nick Gier

Let your light so shine before men,  
that they may see your good works

--Matthew 5:15

When a man is proud, he violates the *dharma*;  
and when *dharma* is violated he goes to hell at once.

--the *Dharmasutra* of Apastamba 1.13.4

Our founders were intellectuals who drew moral and political lessons from Greek and Roman philosophy. With regard to pride, our founders would have been aware that Aristotle ranked it as a virtue second only to wisdom. They would also have known that in the Christian tradition pride was one of the seven deadly sins. The Asian religions generally agree with Christianity on this point. Our founders seemed unaware of this fundamental tension in the hybrid culture that they developed from pagan and Christian roots. Most Americans today are not aware of this conflict either.

In Sunday School we are taught that boasting is a sin, but the previous Friday or Saturday we were out rooting for our athletic teams with unabashed pride. It is also still common to see the 9/11 bumper sticker "The Power of Pride."

One might ask: "What sort of pride, however, is it when your team tends to lose every game"? Surely the answer must be that the goal of sports is not to win but to do your best. If your team has performed well even in defeat, then you can take pride in your team. The ethics of athletic competition is lost when this essential point is ignored.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said that pride is knowing what we have accomplished and freely acknowledging that we have done it. Aristotle does not respect a person who hides her light under a bushel. It is clear that pride can be collective as well as individual. We take pride in the accomplishments of our children because we know that we have contributed to their success.

The same is true for national pride. Any number of U.S. achievements could be named, but I think that the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II was one of our greatest efforts. American exceptionalism—"we are the greatest nation in the world"—is to me false pride. When President Bush boasted that the U.S. had the best health system in the world, he either did not have his facts straight (certainly a possibility) or he was deliberately inflating the nation's ego.

What sort of national pride can we have after the International Committee of the Red Cross has determined that the Bush administration violated the Geneva Conventions on torture? There is definitely nothing to be proud of in these shameful cases.

National Public Radio inspiring series *This I Believe* has just ended with an essay by Muhammad Ali, and he sounds just like the brash young boxer we knew in the 1960s. Ali says that he is still the greatest and that everyone can succeed just as he did. Although I'm sure he does not know it, Ali was following Aristotle when he once proclaimed "It ain't bragging if you can do it."

Normally we would not tolerate people who say that they are the greatest even though they may have accomplished much. Do we give Ali a pass because he is a unique personality or because he now has Parkinson's disease? Early in his career he was roundly criticized for being a braggart.

Recently I heard an interview with Tori McClure, who rowed across the Atlantic only after being inspired by Ali to do it. After her first failed attempt, she started working for the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky. Ali told

her that she should not live with the failure of her first attempt. She realized that Ali was right and went out and achieved her goal. I listened to this remarkable woman for an hour as she was being interviewed by Diane Rehm. There was no boasting as McClure laid out the harrowing details of her feat as if it were just a grueling hike. She succeeded in the face of incredible odds but didn't crow about it.

Aristotle believes that humility is a vice because the accomplished person (and all of us have achieved something) is not being true to herself or himself. Genuine pride is a mean between the excess of boasting when nothing has been attained and the deficit of failing to acknowledge what has been achieved. Perhaps the key is to learn how to talk about our accomplishments without bragging about them. This of course is not an easy line to draw.

False humility is just as bad as unjustified pride. Garrison Keillor was a recent guest on the NPR program *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*. The host Peter Sagal is witty and unflappable, but he was reduced to babbling after Keillor resolutely refused to acknowledge any of Sagal's compliments. I know several people who are unable to take a compliment, and I have also experienced awkward conversations because of this. Are we Americans so conflicted about humility and pride that some of us simply don't know what to say when are faced with owning up to what we've done well? The best response to compliments I've heard is "you are very kind to say that," although that might be too humble for Muhammad Ali.

In his book *Restoring Pride: The Lost Virtue of Our Age* philosopher Richard Taylor defines pride as "justifiable love of yourself." Drawing on what he thinks was the Greek tradition, Taylor explains that pride is "the appreciation of one's own special worth and superiority over others, and to be correct in so believing."

I was gratified to learn that even followers of Ayn Rand, who once wrote a book entitled *The Virtue of Selfishness*, find Taylor's views pride elitist and egocentric. They believe that pride does not require any recognition of superiority and that everyone should have something for which to be proud.

I once met Richard Taylor at a conference and I made the mistake of engaging him in conversation. I told him that I had learned much from his books and had enjoyed the talk that he had just given. I did not even get the courtesy of a reply. Taylor stood there silent and stony cold. It was obvious who the "superior" person was and I slinked away back into the mediocre crowd.

The phrase "hiding your light under a bushel" comes from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus also says: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works" (Matt. 5:15). It would be amazing if the first Christian and Aristotle, usually assumed to be at odds with one another, actually agreed on this and thereby solved our problem.

The fifth chapter of Matthew begins with "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid." Many U.S. presidents have used this passage (sometimes via Puritan John Winthrop) to instill national pride, but this is genuine pride only if we remember to refrain from claiming that we are the greatest.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Even though he does not suggest that you meet him, Gier highly recommends Richard Taylor's book *With Heart and Mind* for the general reader.