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On the Natural Measure of Pride

By Hiram Crespo, editor.

How Pride Came to Matter

June has come to be known as Pride month. It all started in 1969 when the police carried out a raid at the Stonewall Inn, a New York gay bar. As a matter of routine, the cops humiliated the sissies and drag queens, called them names, and began to imprison citizens for no apparent reason. This had been the norm for most of the 60s, but this night in June the gay community spontaneously decided it had had enough and exploded in indignation, in fury, and in pride.

People felt that this treatment was undeserved, that they deserved more humane treatment from the police.

The first armed uprising by sexual minorities in history took place that weekend in June. For a few nights, Stonewall Inn was afire with pride and anger against the police and the homophobic values and the hateful society they embodied. After the 1969 Stonewall Riots, every year in June there are Pride celebrations almost everywhere.

Pride has evolved from a political rally cry for gay rights into a general celebration of people's right to be happy. Other discourses have made their way into the Pride celebrations: even autistic people are beginning to celebrate Autistic Pride during June to help educate others on the importance of neurodiversity. One of my personal autistic heroes, the celebrated Dr. Temple Grandin, eloquently made this case in [a TED speech](#) where she argued that the world needs all kinds of minds.

For many generations, most people had been religious and had mindlessly accepted that pride was sinful, as was man and all things human. But the Stonewall Riots and the gay movement with the Pride discourse that emerged from it produced a series of moral and intellectual challenges that are philosophically and ethically very interesting. It was not just an affront put up by a group of people who were demoralized and brutalized weekly by the police. Pride, within this context, was a cure against undeserved humiliation and shame.

And so, before we move forward and attempt to evaluate Pride as a virtue, the first thing we must acknowledge, the first benefit that Pride confers upon human civilization is that it protects individuals and groups from tyranny

and oppression. Pride can be a spiritual power that takes over a person who is abused, tired or humiliated, and helps that person to stand up, to defend his or her rights, to fight for his dignity and for justice. Pride can be creative, like the volcano that erupts and is violent and disruptive at first, but then its flow can make new islands or new land, create new possibilities.

Vanity, Shame and Pride: On the Need to Recognize Vice and Virtue

When should we be proud and when should we be humble? To many of us, this seems a simple enough question, but it has been the subject of much careful consideration for moral thinkers throughout the ages.

The problem, in particular for those of us who grew up with a Christian epistemology, is one of muddling of our moral compass by false opinion and cultural corruption. By blindly making humility a virtue and pride a sin, and one of the so-called deadly sins at that, there was within the church a tradition of misuse of vanity, pride and humility in the service of social convention, supernaturalism and superstition.

We must recognize that there is a legitimate need and legitimate times for shame. But there has never been an authentic need for an entire culture, or an entire cosmology, built around shame (OR vanity, for that matter).

The church proposed that people should feel unnecessary shame at various forms of imaginary crimes, including the original sin that all babies are supposedly born with. Let's call it the **mea culpa complex**. This produced unnecessary and unnatural guilt, which was also oftentimes disproportionate with the associated crime and, among the very pious, culminated in public and private expressions of self-loathing that sometimes carried neurotic elements. Denial of our sexual and natural selves, self-flagellation, mortification of the body, and other practices of sadism, torture and mutilation were culturally-accepted outlets for the mea culpa complex for centuries.

The fruit of knowledge was also forbidden and denigrated, as was philosophy (love of wisdom) and science: all carried the label of sin.

Although their beliefs were not self-evident, the false prophets who ruled society required blind acceptance of their doctrines, no matter how ridiculous or improbable they seemed. And so, vanity was also equated with intellectual stamina: the faithful, who equate credulity with virtue, at times consider the need for evidence and for rational explanations of baseless beliefs as a form of intellectual vanity rather than the natural, prudent and necessary requirements for an evidence-based search for truth.

The dictionary.com definition of pride is as follows:

a becoming or dignified sense of what is due to oneself or one's position or character; self-respect; self-esteem.

pleasure or satisfaction taken in something done by or belonging to oneself or believed to reflect credit upon oneself: civic pride.

something that causes a person or persons to be proud: His art collection was the pride of the family.

satisfaction or pleasure taken in one's own or another's success, achievements, etc.

Origin:

before 1000; Middle English (noun); Old English *prȳde* (cognate with Old Norse *prȳthi* bravery, pomp), derivative of *prūd* proud

The application of prudence to the issue of pride as a virtue or a vice requires that we accurately measure our self-worth. This implies, no doubt, how productive we are as members of our society; how true we are to our word and how capable of fulfilling our familial and societal duties. It's also tied to how educated we are, and any other accomplishments. In fact, anything that would go on a resume, presumably, should be a legitimate source of pride.

The content of our character should also be a source of pride or shame: if we are wholesome, pleasant, and happy, employ suavity in our speech; if we through effort overcome our vices and cultivate our virtues, if we lead pleasant lives, we should be proud of that.

The Philosophers Opine

One of the early philosophers who discussed pride as a virtue was Aristotle, who identified pride as the crown of the virtues:

Now the man is thought to be proud **who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them**; for he who does so beyond his deserts is a fool, but no virtuous man is foolish or silly. The proud man, then, is the man we have described. For **he who is worthy of little and thinks himself worthy of little is temperate**, but not proud; for **pride implies greatness ...**

To Aristotle, pride requires that a man both be virtuous and magnanimous (worthy of great things) and that he think himself worthy of great things. **Temperance** is also a virtue. Both virtues depend on how deserving one is.

A man, therefore, can not be proud if he is not deserving, worthy of great things. If he thinks himself worthy but is not, then he is vain and conceited. **Vanity** is not pride, but a vice that looks like it, a false or disproportionate sense of pride.

According to Aristotle, not many men can be truly proud. For pride to be a virtue, there needs to be an accurate sense of our worth, abilities and talents. It then becomes the cherry on top with the sprinkles. A mediocre worker or a man with a mean character, for instance, has a right to be temperate, not proud. Only a magnanimous being can be truly proud.

There are men who are puffed up with vanity, but there is also another vice based on an inaccurate sense of humility. **Pusillanimity** is the false humility, the shyness of a man who is of great worth but who thinks lowly of himself. The coward who thinks himself worthy of less than he is worthy of, is pusillanimous.

A 20th Century disciple of Aristotle, the objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand argued adamantly that pride has to be earned and taught that we should make ourselves worthy of life and love:

“One must earn the right to hold oneself as one’s own highest value by achieving one’s own moral perfection”

- The Virtue of Selfishness

She also argued that man should never take pride in accidental facts laid out by Fortune, like our race or gender or nationality, because they’re not in themselves achievements. Epicurean doctrine seems to somewhat echo this belief:

*The study of nature does not create men who are fond of boasting and chattering or who show off the culture that impresses the many, but rather **men who are strong and self-sufficient, and who take pride in their own personal qualities not in those that depend on external circumstances.*** – Vatican Saying 45

For a moment, it seems like Rand is making sense but she isn't. We're left with no possibility of **inherent** human dignity if we ignore that Pride can also be a cure for needless self-deprecation and shame resulting from societal corruption. Just as there is a natural measure of wealth versus cultural measures of wealth—which oftentimes lead to vain and empty desires—, there also seems to exist tension between our natural and cultural measures of pride.

Perhaps we shouldn't be proud of things we didn't choose (being of a certain ethnicity, sexual orientation, or nationality), but by the same token we should also not be ashamed of those things. There is a conception of pride as a healthy self-appreciation, an accurate and wholesome sense of self-esteem (sometimes in spite of societal pressure), that is missing from Randian discourse.

Perhaps this sense of inherent dignity should be called self-respect, but it often looks and feels like pride, and someone who has to work for years to achieve this sense of self-respect under the pressure of societal loathing or ignorance, might experience it as an accomplishment.

There's another problem with the Randian approach to pride. If we take it at face value, what will we make of a human baby that is born entirely vulnerable? It has not lived long enough to accomplish anything, and so therefore is not *worthy* of love and protection, but it *needs* love and protection and will not survive without it. And what about autistic children and others who are capable of greatness but require very special attention to achieve it? There is no possibility of a continued humanity if we take this notion of earning our pride at face value. We would degenerate into beasts if we failed to respect and nurture the weak and the vulnerable: there is a missing ingredient here.

Rand believes that life is the highest good, but forgets to honor the pleasure principle, by which nature guides us, as equal to life: it is pleasure that seals the bond between mother and child, **it is pleasure that makes things valuable, and in fact it is pleasure that makes life itself worth living.** This is the immediate, direct experience of natural beings, and not dependent on culture.

And so Pride, as a virtue, must serve pleasure and its measurement must be subjected to hedonic calculus. Pleasure must always be our pole star. While it's true that gay people did not experience the Pride revolution until after they stood up for themselves and carried out an uprising against police brutality at Stonewall, it's also true that the brutality was uncalled for and that if society's values had been better informed by hedonism, the embarrassing episode at the Stonewall Inn would have been entirely unnecessary.

It would have been a greater achievement, and one to be truly proud of, if we had been able to create *a priori* a pleasant society where people had the ability to lead happy lives, a society of free people that avoids the unpleasantness of uprisings in order to assert the right of consenting adults to enjoy sex and to love freely. In retrospect, the avoidance of unpleasantness is blessedness. We should take pride in the fact that we abolished and overcame slavery, for instance.

Similarly, if we as individuals develop an art of living pleasantly and avoid the detrimental repercussions of living violently, vulgarly, of living lives of vice, we also have every right to take pride in our technique of living, our guiding philosophy, because it leads to the creation of beautiful, happy lives, lives that are worth living, lives we can be proud of. It's not just wealth and productivity, but also quality of life that gives a sense of worth to people.

Autarchy as the Natural Measure of Pride

We have seen in Vatican Saying 45 that self-sufficiency is tied to Epicurean notions of pride. Notice also that proportion also matters to us in helping to discern the natural measure of pride: conceit and vanity, false pride, are tied in Epicureanism with limitless and empty desires that enslave us. Philodemus warned us against spending more than what we have in order to fulfil the duties of our social status or to be ostentatious. Even the accurately proud man spends and lives within his means.

The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure; but the wealth required by vain ideals extends to infinity. – Principal Doctrines 15

Pride, to an Epicurean, assumes the garb of autarchy, self sufficiency, not just as an economic ideal but also as a spiritual ideal. A proud Epicurean will not rely on Fortune, or fear her, but will build his own destiny and attempt to remain imperturbable and impervious to forces beyond his power.

I have anticipated you, Fortune, and entrenched myself against all your secret attacks. And we will not give ourselves up as captives to you or to any other circumstance; but when it is time for us to go, spitting contempt on life and on those who here vainly cling to it, we will leave life crying aloud in a glorious triumph-song that we have lived well. – Vatican Saying 47

Going back to the mea culpa complex, we must ask ourselves who was really puffed up with vanity. We must ask this as we ponder the true virtues of pride and temperance and the vices of vanity and pusillanimity against the tireless efforts made by science and empirical inquiry over millenia to uncover truth and the efforts made by religion to cover it, to ban it, to persecute it, and religion's lazy explanations for things that had a discernable, natural explanation.

We must ask who is really puffed up with vanity when we contrast the contented attitude of the naturalist who accepts his mortality with equanimity versus the charlatan priest, pastor, guru or imam who will promise mortals an immortality that he has no way of conferring and that is not to be found anywhere in nature, for our senses all tell us that all that is born must die.

Epicurus was a proud man who claimed to be self-taught and did not give credit to his predecessors for his teachings. His doctrine was founded upon a Canon, a measuring stick that made evidence from the senses a criterion for truth. From the onset and from its very foundation, this is a philosophy that respects our intelligence.

He also was temperate in that he humbly accepted his natural limits and proclaimed that he did not need what he didn't have, exhibiting a sober awareness of the right proportions of pride, and an awareness of where it degenerates into vanity or false humility. He lived a happy and virtuous life, and died grateful like one who is satisfied after a banquet.

This month, begin to consider how you earn the crown of autarchy and make the resolution to build a place in your soul for pride in your personal qualities and in your self-sufficiency. Have a Happy Pride Month.