

Pride and the Logic of Self-Sufficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton concludes her novel, *Ethan Frome*, with an unhappy picture of Ethan that is evocatively captured in the following observation from his neighbor, Mrs. Hale, to a recent visitor: “I don’t believe but what you’re the only stranger has set foot in that house for over twenty years. He’s that proud he don’t even like his oldest friends to go there...”¹ If we thought that being proud required feeling the emotion of pride towards some accomplishment then we would be unable to comprehend Mrs. Hale comment, since feeling this positive emotion does not motivate a person to keep his oldest friends from visiting. But we do know what Mrs. Hale means.

Indeed, her reference to pride allows even someone unacquainted with Wharton’s famous novel to grasp much about Ethan’s character and circumstances, including his proneness to feeling shame about his economic and moral poverty, symbolized in the form of ‘that house’. ‘Proud’ conjures up an image of an agent, his actions, and his view of his standing among others. This image need not include the emotion of pride, which (as I have argued elsewhere²) involves taking oneself to be living in accordance with one’s ideals. If Ethan feels anything while he refuses to accept visitors then it is not pride, but shame at the prospect of having to face those who might condemn or pity him.

In this essay, I sketch a descriptive and normative account of the character trait of pride and land upon a surprising conclusion about the proper role of the self in

¹ Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970 (originally published in 1911), p. 86.

² “The Emotion of Pride”, unpublished manuscript.

deliberation. I develop a preliminary account of pride from the observation that the excessively proud are typically moved by considerations of self-sufficiency. I explain the concern for self-sufficiency with the help of a distinction between ‘ideal-desires’, which take the form, “I want that I meet my ideal of...”, and all other (‘non-ideal’) desires.³ I argue that the proud are disposed to care about the objects of these ideal-desires, and the excessively proud excessively so. I find that there are conditions under which the concern for meeting one’s ideals systematically drives one away from the assistance of others (in particular, when such assistance can threaten to compromise one’s standing with respect to some of one’s ideals). I conclude with remarks about why excessive pride is such a pernicious vice.

II. SELF-SUFFICIENCY

*‘Father, with God’s help even a worthless man
Could triumph. I propose, without that help,
To win my prize of fame.’
~Sophocles, Ajax, lines 769-771*

In this sketch I focus on instances of excessive pride, which bring out the character of pride more vividly than their more proper cousins. One familiar and paradigmatic feature of the excessively proud is their desire for self-sufficiency. As Wharton illustrates in *Ethan Frome*, a proud person dislikes asking for assistance when doing so requires the admission that one is ‘in a tight place’ or ‘going under’. Consider:

Ethan felt that if he had pleaded an urgent need Hale might have made shift to pay him; but pride, and an instinctive prudence, kept him from resorting to this argument. After his father’s death it had taken time to get his head above water, and he did not want Andrew

³ For a similar distinction, see Bernard Williams, “Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence”, reprinted in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980*, (New York: Cambridge University, 1981), pp. 40-53; also relevant is his “Egoism and altruism,” reprinted in *Problems of the Self* (New York: Cambridge University, 1973), pp. 250-265.

Hale, or any one else in Starkfield, to think he was going under again. Besides, he hated lying; if he wanted the money he wanted it, and it was nobody's business to ask why. He therefore made his demand with the awkwardness of a proud man who will not admit to himself that he is stooping; and he was not much surprised at Hale's refusal...

“See here—you ain't in a tight place, are you?”

“Not a bit,” Ethan's pride retorted before his reason had time to intervene” (37-8).

Why do the proud so dislike 'stooping'? What moves Ethan to crave the public image of self-sufficiency? An answer to these questions will help us to develop an account of pride.

A first stab at explaining this craving is that the proud do not wish to admit that they are failing to meet some ideal. Call this 'the public failure account'. Ethan cares about being a decent person and a supportive family member. When he radically fails to even approximate these ideals, he cannot bear to admit the fact to others (nor to himself), and so cannot accept their assistance. This explanation ties the craving for self-sufficiency to shame about one's failures and, indeed, failure comes as a shameful blow for the proud. In addition, it is interesting and significant that the proud do not want others to know of their distress. They do not want others to assist them once their distress is well-known, though Ethan would have been happy enough to be given assistance under false pretenses that wouldn't have let on to his state of need. (Ethan “did not want Andrew Hale, or any one else in Starkfield, to think he was going under again”) Again, the public failure account can explain concern for the opinion of others in terms of the agent's shame, which is a notoriously public emotion.⁴

⁴ I have argued elsewhere (“On Having Ideals”, unpublished manuscript) that there is a connection between having ideals and caring about one's standing in a community—even for those who are not merely vain. However, I will not here discuss this issue directly, because even if the argument for that connection is sound, I think that the fact that the proud wish to keep their failures private does not explain why the proud seem to care about going it alone, without the help of others. For, as I argue below, the proud disposition to refuse to receive help is not limited to contexts in which the proud are failing. For three different accounts of shame as a public emotion, see Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993);

When we think of a proud person refusing help we often imagine someone like Ethan Frome, who is struggling and in need of assistance; or someone who is *not* like the narrator of the Temptations song, “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” (“I’m not ashamed to come and plead to you baby. / If pleading keeps you from walking out that door.”); or a lost traveler who is too proud to ask for directions. These examples of the proud in need absorb our attention because they are so vivid and dramatic; they are the cases in which a proud person is most likely to be torn over whether to accept assistance and it seems (to many people) downright bizarre that anyone should refuse help when in desperate need. So it is natural to suppose, as the public failure explanation does, that the proud are opposed to receiving help only when they desperately need it. But we must take care to avoid both the assumption that the proud only refuse help when downtrodden and, along with it, the public failure account. It is not just shame about one’s failures that drives the proud to crave self-sufficiency—rather, the culprit is an elaborate view about the good life.

The proud resist assistance when they are succeeding just as much as they do when they are failing. The epigram to this section shows that a proud person may disdain assistance in a principled fashion that is not limited to contexts of failure. In Sophocles’ tragedy, Ajax, as a matter of principle, wants not to be assisted in pursuing his ideals. He believes that (all things being equal) the help of another detracts from one’s worth. Moreover, and crucially, Ajax takes the fact that “with God’s help even a worthless man / Could triumph” to count in favor of refusing Athena’s help, which indicates that he cares deeply about how much he is worth. In this respect, Ajax dramatizes certain Stoic

Calhoun, “An Apology for Moral Shame”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2004, pp. 127-146 and John Deigh, “Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique”, *Ethics*, Vol. 93, No. 2., Jan. 1983, pp. 225-245.

theses about the self-sufficiency of the good person.⁵ A proud person construes the proffered help of another as something to be resisted because it poses a threat to his worth. It is worthwhile pausing to consider why the proud hold this stoic attitude towards help. I will argue that this attitude can be traced to the conviction that personal excellence consists in meeting one's personal ideals. This conviction might appear ethically innocuous, or even praiseworthy, but it has dramatic implications.

I begin with a reminder in the form of a tautology. For a person to whom it is important that they meet their ideals, it is crucial that *they* meet their ideals. Ajax would much rather that *he* meet his heroic ideal of defeating his enemies on the battlefield than that another should defeat them. In this formal sense he is egoistic: he is driven by the desire that *he* do good more than by the desire that there be good. This egoism need not be substantively, or crudely, self-centered. Formally egoistic desires of the sort that I shall consider can have the good of others as their object, e.g., as when I desire that I help someone in need; and formally non-egoistic desires might have the good of myself as their object, e.g., as when I desire that the United States prosper economically. I suggest that the proud are most of all characterized by their disposition to care about one species of

⁵ I use 'Stoic' in the widest sense, meant to include Plato and Aristotle in addition to Seneca and other paradigmatic Stoics. For example, in *Republic*, Socrates claims that "a good person is most self-sufficient when it comes to living well, and is distinguished from other people by having the least need of anyone or anything else" (*Rep.* III 388, tr. Reeve).⁵ In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes the great-souled man in like terms: "He is the sort of person to bestow benefits, but is ashamed at receiving them; for the former is the mark of a superior, the latter of an inferior... It is also a mark of the great-souled person not to ask anyone for anything, or only reluctantly, but to offer his services readily..." (*EN* 1124b9-11; 1124b18-19).⁵ Moderns echo this concern, as in the examples Kant offers in his discussion of servility and self-respect: "Do not accept favors you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or (what really differs from these only in degree) a beggar" (*Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:436; tr. Gregor). For a recent study of self-sufficiency in Greek thought, see Martha Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986).

formally egoistic considerations.⁶ Ajax wants that ‘I [Ajax] meet my ideal of heroism,’ whereas a less proud soldier might have only the formally non-egoistic desire that, say, “we win the battle.” The proud, as do we all, have a kind of formally egoistic desire that is tied to their meeting their personal ideals. Call these “ideal-desires,” desires that the agent meets her ideals. Not all I-desires are ideals-desires; for example, I might want that I eat a filet of salmon or that I be free from pain. Neither of these I-desires need involve a person’s ideals.

Trying to meet one’s ideals differs from trying to do good, and the excessively proud are characteristically more concerned with the former than are the deficiently proud. The proud think that a person always has good, if not sufficient,⁷ reason to try to fare well with respect to her (worthy) ideals whenever she has the opportunity. In other words, the proud take it that the greatest good (really, a meta-good) at which to aim is meeting one’s (worthy) ideals. This claim can seem tautologous at first blush—if one takes an ideal to be worthy then (it seems) the best thing one can do is to meet those ideals. But there might be important goods the achievement or pursuit of which do not contribute to one’s meeting one’s ideals. It may be better to contribute modestly to a collaborative effort of great importance than to achieve something of less importance by oneself, even if more credit accrues to one in the latter case than in the former. Suppose that with Athena’s guides Ajax could butcher two warriors (but without deserving much credit for

⁶ Bernard Williams draws a relevant distinction in terms of what he calls ‘I-desires’ (Bernard Williams, “Egoism and altruism,” reprinted in *Problems of the Self*. New York: Cambridge University, 1973; pp. 250-265). Williams characterizes I-desires and ‘non-I desires’ in terms of whether the state of affairs, *p*, in the formula, ‘I want that *p*,’ requires ‘I’ (or related expressions like ‘my’). As Williams notes, this formulation comes from Anthony Kenny (*Action, Emotion, and Will*).

⁷ Again, in this essay I am discussing the excessively proud. In a longer version, I distinguish proper pride from excessive pride, and maintain that the virtue consists in taking ideal-based considerations as reason-giving only in the right circumstances and that the vice consists in too frequently taking these considerations to be reason-giving.

doing so), and that without her help he could butcher one warrior. If Ajax's concern is to bring about the most good then he should allow Athena to help (making the dubious assumption that his cause is just and that killing Trojans is good). But if his concern is to meet his ideals, which it is, then he should refuse Athena's help, which he does.⁸

The Ajax story simply brings to light the obvious truth that there are ways to cause good to come about without doing anything for which one can be proud. In the spirit of Robert Nozick, let's imagine a result machine, "which produces in the world any result you would produce and injects your vector input into any joint activity".⁹ Suppose that result machines have been improved since Nozick wrote about them so that they can now produce far better results than one could produce oneself. Now, given the choice between accomplishing something oneself and producing far better results with the machine, most of us (especially the proud among us) would choose the former. As Ajax might have said, with the result machine's help even a worthless man could triumph. Entering the machine could bring about good, for sure. But, in general, one would have no cause for taking pride in bringing about those consequences, or in finding it to be a meaningful 'activity', which indicates that bringing about those consequences may not help one in meeting one's ideals.

The result machine example underscores the mundane idea that we sometimes care about doing things ourselves, and I suggest that one reason for this is that we have pride. Pride involves a desire to leave one's stamp on the world, which is very different from the desire that the world be stamped.

⁸ Another category of examples is the problem of dirty hands. There is, inevitably, a potential for conflict between holding fast to one's ideals and achieving important political goals. Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.

⁹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 44

The fact that the proud care about their ideal-desires does not by itself entail what we are trying to explain, namely that they desire self-sufficiency to the extent that they do. That entailment requires a separate thesis about the nature of personal worth specifying that the degree to which one meets one's ideals is inversely proportional to the degree to which one depends upon the assistance of others. In other words, the view that the more others help you to win, the less you win. The more that the gods help Ajax to kill his enemies, the less that Ajax meets his heroic ideals. Call this the 'dilution thesis'. However, it is important to note that the class of ideals for which it holds is a subset of all ideals.

It is simply not true that, in general, depending upon other people inhibits one from meeting one's ideals. Exceptions to this general claim involve ideals the meeting of which is compatible with lack of self-sufficiency. For instance, consider the collective ideal of being a good teammate. One basis of this ideal might be the fact that the success of a team depends upon the success of its weakest member. Meeting the ideal, then, involves not only helping one's teammates but also accepting the help of others when one needs it. A member who refused to accept assistance, then, would fail to meet this ideal in one important respect. We can imagine saying of such a person that he is too proud to be a good teammate. This person might be too proud because of not being able to see the value of being a good teammate, and so for not having this ideal.

The example of being too proud to be a good teammate suggests that the excessively proud, insofar as they are excessively proud, are unable to care appropriately about certain sorts of ideals. The viciously proud (among other things) care about the wrong ideals; they do not care (or do not care enough) about collective ideals and care too much about individualistic ideals, those ideals for which the dilution thesis holds.

This brings us back to the point of entry into the discussion, which is the case of Ethan refusing the aid of others when he is in need. I began with the suggestion that Ethan's refusal is motivated partly by his shame at having failed to meet his ideals. I think the dilution thesis can deepen this explanation. Although Ethan sees himself as a failure, I think he would consider help from others as threatening to further dilute the little worth he takes himself to have retained. And so it is a bit misleading to say that Ethan is moved by a desire to avoid shame, because we do not fully make sense of that motive without appreciating its basis in Ethan's fear of further ethical dilution. The ultimate explanation for Ethan's refusal of aid cannot be his shame because the shame itself calls for explanation.

To sum up: I began this section with the observation that refusing the assistance of others is an paradigmatic feature of the excessively proud that cannot be fully explained by the proud person's wish of avoiding the shame of public failure. For, such refusal is also characteristic of the well-off proud, who have nothing to be ashamed of. Instead, I argued that this refusal is typically tied to the robust aim of self-sufficiency. I argued that the concern to meet one's ideals may, under certain conditions, entail a concern for self-sufficiency. These conditions include the conditions under which one is proud. I emphasized two such conditions: first, that the proud care more about meeting their ideals than about bringing about good; and second, that the proud care too much about individualistic ideals. I characterized individualistic ideals as those ideals for which the dilution thesis holds—those ideals under which the aid of others cannot augment one's worth. I will now conclude by relating these conclusions to our moral evaluation of pride.

III. CONCLUSION

If my account of excessive pride is correct, then the overriding concern for meeting one's personal ideals cannot be morally appropriate because it involves a radically distorted view of ethical life. The excessively proud person suffers from moral jealousy insofar as he refuses to do what is right unless it is to his moral credit. But he is also, more fundamentally, indifferent to collective ideals. Although I cannot establish this claim here, there appears, at least, to be an incoherency in the commitment to individualistic ideals of excellence alone. For the very content of such ideals is typically derived from some collective good. Courage, for example, derives much of its point as an individualistic ideal from the important role it plays in the maintenance of society. If this is right, and if the proud lack collective ideals, then the proud are doomed to failure in their own eyes.