

On Pride and Greed

by Michael A Green, 2016, www.theallowablethoughtcage.com

A friend of mine handed me an old issue of 'Scientific American MIND' (November/December 2013) and suggested I read the articles on greed and pride. It was a special issue on the seven deadly sins. I wasn't sure why he singled these out from the rest, you know, gluttony, envy, sloth, wrath and lust, yet I was happy he hadn't asked me to read the entire magazine so I didn't dwell on it.

The first article, The Price of Greed, by Dan Ariely and Aline Gruneisen, provided its own summary in a little box labeled 'Ruined by Avarice'. It contained three numbered points: 1) Since competition rules a market economy, many economists conclude that people contribute to the 'greater good' by focusing exclusively on personal gain. Well, that likely says more about economists than the economy, yet it was countered by the second point. 2) Greed is not a good thing because it leads people to spend more than they can afford, often culminating in bankruptcy, long commutes and divorce. The third point tipped the scales by concluding that 3) Believing that greed is necessary for the economy to thrive serves to justify pursuing selfish motivations more than it reflects true economic wisdom. Hardly shocking news.

Still, the most interesting point the article made related to schooling. It was based on the results of three experiments. Three brief quotes will make the results clear:

“the more students had been schooled in economics, the more positively they viewed greed.”

“even just a hint of exposure to economic theory can convince people of the virtues of greed.”

“students with no prior training held more positive opinions of greed just after they read a statement on the economic benefits of self-interest.”

So, greed is a value our most esteemed educational institutions are promoting and encouraging as the basis of sound economic theory, even though the authors agree this does not represent 'true economic wisdom'. Hmmm... That's telling... This sheds a little light on the supposed benefits of schooling, and perhaps the germs of some other social problems as well.

The second article, Pride and Power, by Jessica L. Tracy, made some interesting points. It also had a three-point summary box, indicating 1) Pride comes from people feeling good about themselves, and yet can somehow bring out both the best and the worst in human nature. 2) There appear to be two major and significantly different types of pride, hubristic or arrogant pride and authentic pride. 3) The hubristic or egotistical type of pride can damage mental health and friendships, whereas authentic pride spurs aspirations to greater achievements and includes attempting to please others as well as oneself. Both types, nevertheless, seem to facilitate the accumulation of power and status.

The most striking point the article made was *“Like it or not, it pays to be a bully...”*

I've seen bullies or 'dominants' as the article puts it, in the workplace myself, and while it does tend to 'pay' in terms of position, salary and influence, I also found that those who lead and/or manage dominantly tend to be broadly disliked. Of course, 'good managers' can't be worried about whether people like them or not and 'business is not a popularity contest'. Still, people tend to sabotage the efforts of bullies in any little ways they can, as long as they think they can get away with it, and this does effect business—sometimes in a big way.

In the end, the article on pride left me wondering about an important issue it failed to raise, a crucial question: What, exactly, are these various people proud of?

Are they proud of an accomplishment, of helping someone, of getting a pat on the back, of jumping through a hoop, of doing what they were told, of a clever innovation, of getting away with something, of taking advantage of someone or some situation? What gives people their sense of 'pride'?

The answers to this type of question contain more telling cues about character than whether their 'pride' appears to be of the 'hubristic' or 'authentic' type.

In my experience, some 'pride' can appear authentic and underlying be 'hubristic', and vice versa. When I find out exactly what someone feels proud of or about, I have a much clearer window into what's really driving them.

Some people who appear hubristic just need a friend, mentor or colleague they can confide in, trust and be open with because they're insecure or afraid and their basic intentions can be very positive.

Some people who appear altruistically or authentically proud, may be presenting a false front for various reasons, possibly including manipulation, deception, covering for insecurities, or simply expressing an aggressive (or 'dominant') disposition.

I've seen people beam with pride over getting the coffee machine to operate properly. I've also witnessed managers building themselves up by dramatically inflating the importance of their accomplishments in key reports, or planning how to make someone else look bad, or attempting to gain my collusion in taking advantage of the work of others. I've also seen people take pride in doing some little thing extremely well, or in contributing a well-timed insight to a group brainstorm, or in correctly anticipating another person's needs and arranging for them in advance of the person realizing their own needs until the last minute—when arranging for them would have created delays or other problems.

What, exactly, a person feels proud of seems to probe more deeply into the fundamental character of the issues and drives involved in evaluating the role of pride, yet this question was never raised by the researchers. Another side-benefit of their advanced schooling perhaps?

For more writing like this about the qualities of 'character' that guide us and related topics, check out the articles and posts on theallowablethoughtcage.com and read the book [*Unlocking The Allowable-Thought Cage Imprisoning Our Imaginations*](#).