

**Address to the Summer Program
University of Western Australia**

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'Pride'

Pride comes first in St Thomas Aquinas's list of deadly sins, perhaps because it is the complicated one, the one he had to wrestle with most — intellectually speaking, anyway. Lust aside, there's not a lot to be said in favour of the other deadly sins — envy, gluttony, malice and so on. But pride comes in two flavours, the good and the bad. We talk of 'proper' pride, a usage that sets pride apart, since it is hard to think of examples of proper malice or proper envy. A reading through the dictionary entry makes clear that pride is a complex thing. Let's start with the positives (my source is the *Shorter Oxford*):

- * a feeling of elation or high satisfaction;
- * a person who produces such feelings (the 'pride' of the nation);
- * one's prime — the best, most excellent condition;
- * a consciousness of what is befitting one's position — honest pride;
- * mettle or spirit as in a horse; and
- * a group of lions.

Throughout these meanings run threads of aspiration and achievement: we feel proud of those who belong to us when they do great things, and we aspire to such achievements ourselves. Linked to pride are notions of how we should behave, both individually and collectively, and pride therefore plays an important part in the formation of personal and group identity. I will come back to this line of argument later. Now to the negatives:

- * a high or over-weening self opinion of worth;
- * arrogance; and
- * pomp and ostentation.

These are, I think, shades of much the same meaning. The first is the root cause of the behaviour delineated in the second and third. None of us likes this kind of pride, wherever and whenever we encounter it. It is especially what Jane Austen ridiculed in *Pride and Prejudice*, and for a reason which is as valid today as it was nearly two hundred years ago, when she wrote the novel: your over-high sense of your worth necessarily diminishes your sense of my worth — and, if I am not careful, my own sense of my worth. Elizabeth Bennett makes sure that this does not happen to her by refusing to take Mr Darcy at his own valuation; her elder sister Jane is less strong, and is almost crushed when she realises (and accepts) the judgment of Mr Darcy about her worth as a wife for his friend Mr Bingley.

Despite the positives, pride has had a bad press. Most of the famous references to it are negative, from the often-misquoted line from the *Bible* (Proverbs 16.18)

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall

to Alexander Pope's summary in *An Essay on Criticism* (Ib, II, 1)

Of all the causes which conspire to blind
 Man's erring judgment, and misguide the mind,
 What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
 Is Pride, the never failing vice of fools.

Yet, as we have seen, the truth is somewhat more complicated. Pride has an important role to play in our shaping as individuals, and plays a comparable role in the development of social groups and nations. In what follows I try to balance the positives and the negatives, and reflect on what we ought to do about this deadly sin. In order to offer a sensible discussion of the issues I need to start with some comments about Life and its purpose. I have come to the view, as a humanist as well as a thinker, reader and writer, that human beings require a purpose to their lives in order that their existence has meaning and that the experience of their life produces satisfaction. For my part, the purpose to one's Life is the construction of a person about whose actions and relationships one can be justifiably proud (there it is again!) or, if you like, with whom one can live thoughtfully and in a state of reasonable comfort.

There is a collective equivalent to this perspective: human society — and within that term I include sub-categories of human society like nations, corporations, organisations, schools, clubs and so on — human society too has a purpose, which is to improve the lot of its members in obvious ways. At the end of one's life one ought to be able to say that, on the whole and taking everything into account, one is handing on to one's children and grandchildren a society that is plainly better than the society one inherited. I don't want to argue this out before you, though I can do so, and I accept at once that others can put forward credible alternative purposes to Life. But since I am about to make lots of judgments, it is important for you to know where I am coming from and why I will be making the judgments I make.

You will see the relevance of all of this at once as I start on personal pride. In general, we want a fair minimum of that in everyone: we expect others to have the sort of sense of self that would make them anguished if others thought badly of them. So we say, about someone whose room, or office or house is perpetually untidy and slovenly, 'Don't they have any pride in themselves?' We think much the same of people who live off the work of others and seem unwilling to exert themselves in any way. We expect skilled people to have a pride in their skill such that they would not wish to produce sloppy work — whether or not we would be aware of the sloppiness themselves. We expect those who are placed in high office to act in ways consistent with that high office: they should be proud of the position they hold, and honour it. So notions of pride are intermingled with notions of proper behaviour. And a feeling for what is proper behaviour — a sense of what standards are — is indispensable if we are to act coherently and consistently, and build a self of whom we are proud. Pride in self, for good reasons, is the basis of a strong and integrated personality. The disciplines of psychology and education have a good deal to say about all this.

Although we will spend our whole lives in discovering and fashioning this sense of self, and the accompanying pride in self, it is plain that parents have the first significant role in nurturing and developing it in their children. Love and support, encouragement and help, give children the opportunity to acquire a proper pride in their own accomplishments, a pride which is the basis for their sense of self, their identity. Given such a start, a young adult has an excellent chance of growing himself or herself, and fulfilling Life's purpose. Fulfillment can, of course, be accomplished without such a start, and all of us know people who have had a miserable start to life, relatively speaking, but have come through all that with style and success. Indeed, the pages of *Who's Who*, to take one example, are full of examples of the truth that a good start is not everything. But it helps.

So there's a lot to be said for Pride. But it comes with a cost. Throughout one's progress through Life there is abundant opportunity to move from a proper pride to an improper one. All of us, to make a small but obvious point, know people who seem to take undue pride in quite small achievements. We have probably all done so ourselves at one time or another. Pride ought not to be worn on the sleeve, for to do so is rarely to win friends and influence people. More broadly, few people can truly claim the whole credit for any personal achievement, though it is always tempting for one to do so. All of us have done what we have done with and through the help of other people. John Kenneth Galbraith has a nice line about that in his autobiography (*A Life in our Times. Memoirs*):

You are always aware of your own efforts, much less so of the efforts of the many who similarly engage themselves. From this comes a pleasantly exaggerated sense of accomplishment

How is pride to be controlled? Social pressure has a part to play. Children who allow their pride in self to be too obvious will be brought down a peg or two by their peers. Much the same happens to adults. A certain amount of detectable pride is allowable, but beyond that the haughty spirit needs to watch out for the approaching fall. That is, of course, in the rough kind of egalitarian democracy that Australia is, or perhaps used to be. Countries which are oligarchies or aristocracies institutionalise pride, which is then a cause for social deference. You will recall that Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* drew his pride simply from the circumstances of his birth, in which event of course he was an outcome, not an achiever. The human urge to be proud of anything distinctive about oneself that is simply adjectival — one's family background, one's social class, one's religion, one's ethnic origin — is one of the downside consequences of the development of a sense of self, of personal pride. It is powerful indeed, and you don't need me to tell you that Australia has its fair share of it. But in the case of our own country it is at least tempered by a strong focus on achievement, especially in sport. Sport allows participation and achievement at a large number of levels, which in turn allows a lot of people to draw pride — a proper pride, to be sure — from their achievements. As a meritocrat from way back, I am strongly in favour of achievement as a necessary preliminary for serious social distinction.

But let me make an earlier point again. Every sporting success, every great musical performer, needs to acknowledge the efforts of teachers, coaches,

mentors, parents, partners and even rivals. Perhaps the time one lives in deserves some credit, too, because of the opportunities it has provided for the exercise of one's particular set of skills. I am very well aware that, whatever my own worldly success, I was born in 1937, the year of the lowest birthrate in the 20th century in our country, and that I came into the workforce at a time when there was both a rapid expansion in the need for educated and skilled people and sustained economic growth to support that expansion. Along with the rest of my generation, I was very lucky to have been born when I was; my children have been much less fortunate in their birth years. So those who have succeeded need dispassionately to inspect not just their own deeds, but the circumstances which enabled those deeds. The outcome should usually be a diminished sense of personal pride.

Recent university graduates, a group I have a part in producing, often have the balance about right. They have a justifiable feeling of pride in the fact that they have secured their first degree, an accomplishment which requires hard work on the part of the student in any Australian university, in any faculty. But their pride is tempered by their self-knowledge that what they know is a tiny fraction of what is to be known. If I could have a wish granted for my country it would be that all its citizens had the perspective of recent university graduates, and possessed that socially useful mixture of self-confidence and humility. It is in fact a wish that could be granted, by any wise government which really saw the point of educating us as far as possible and as often as possible. I feel a political speech coming on, so I will conclude this point by saying that we are, alas, some way from the goal of universal higher education, though it has been espoused by the West Committee, whose final report will go to the Government early this year.

There are many other things that could be said about pride at the individual level, but I would like to move now to the sort of pride which we exhibit about ourselves collectively. Once again, it seems that a high degree of collective pride is important if a society is to work well. 'Tidy towns' competitions perhaps provide an obvious and non-controversial example. Municipal or civic pride, the pride shown by agricultural societies at their annual show, by schools at speech night, by universities at graduation, by all social organisations at that usually annual moment when they say 'Here we are, and this is what we do, and isn't it good!' — that sort of pride is about collective achievement, and it seems good to me for two reasons. The first is that the collective achievement itself is always worthwhile, and the second is that these social organisations and their work are among the most important elements of a good civil society. When they function well, it is likely that other parts of our social and political order are also working well. It follows, then, that we should support the kind of activities which produce that kind of pride.

There are some forms of collective pride, however, that I feel we can do well without. One of them is pride of race, which I remember from my youth, and was characteristic of that time. It was even more characteristic fifty years earlier, at the turn of the century, when phrases like 'the white man's burden' were frequently used, and 'half-caste' was a term of real opprobrium. Those who, like myself, were obsessive readers of W. E. Johns, will remember that Biggles found half-castes to be the least trustworthy of all those whom he encountered in his long career. Race was a powerful world earlier in our

century, and in most respects it was powerful for ill rather than for good. It is not a word we use much more any more, especially in this country. Australia is now a passingly successful multi-cultural society, a matter from which we should draw some pride, and about which more in a moment.

National pride expressed in military conquest has been the bane of the world for the last 200 years, and one blessing of the apparently approaching global world is that in it the nation-state will be much less important. But we should remember that national pride also was important in the development of human societies which could provide a better life for their citizens by mobilising the possibilities offered during the 19th century by the industrial revolution, new forms of transportation and communication, and the creation of a public sector responsible for education, health and welfare. Without the collective feeling of pride in what had been achieved, or could be achieved, it is doubtful that the democracies of the 20th century could have emerged at all. Once again, pride seems to have a complex nature: we need it to achieve things, to try harder, to aspire further. Yet we suffer if that pride passes a certain point: its social consequence then is harmful, not beneficial. Let me illustrate with a contemporary example.

To another audience a few months ago I pointed to the need for Australians to develop the framework of a new account of ourselves, something that could build on the 'Australian Legend' delineated by the late Russel Ward. There are excellent reasons for our trying to do so, and they are familiar to you all. We live at a time when confidence in the future of our country is not high, at least in comparison, say, to the 1960s or 1970s. Hugh Mackay has set all this out well in some recent books (notably *Reinventing Australia* and *Generations*). We owe a lot of money to the world; our currency is not strong; unemployment remains high and real unemployment is at a higher rate than the 8 or 9 per cent discussed in the media; there is widespread feeling of lack of security about jobs, marriages, families, the future generally; there is a feeling that the country lacks a common set of values; suicide among young people is dramatically more frequent than it was a generation ago. I am only skimming quickly over the surface of our discontents, and I do this to point out that in these respects our level of national pride is not what it was. We need to regain that sense of pride.

There is in fact a lot about which we could be proud, and we can redefine ourselves as a nation by considering what we have done well — and take a proper pride in these achievements. Let me remind you of some of our achievements in the second half of this century. We remain a decently wealthy country, with high standards in health, education and welfare — yes, I know that these are under attack. In comparison to the Australia of 1950, we are much better educated, much more tolerant, more outgoing, more curious, less timid, less cringy. Our art, music and literature, our universities and hospitals and scientific laboratories, our cuisine are all of high world standard. Above all, we have taken into our society over the past half-century millions of people from scores of other countries, and in the process have fashioned, in a generally tolerant and good-humoured way, one of the few countries in the world in which human beings from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds live together in a sort of harmony. In my opinion, it is this admixture of peoples that has been the under-pinning of the the achievements in which we can take pride. What fascinates me is that

some people in high positions — our Prime Minister often seems to be an example — seem almost to wish that the transition of Australia from a constipated British colony to a lively, non-imperialist, multi-cultural republic-in-process had never occurred.

If Australia is to be as successful in the 21st century as it undoubtedly has been in the 20th century, then we will have to develop a new Australian legend which is built on the successes of the 20th century, and they are overwhelmingly social and cultural, not economic. I remind you that we were on such accounts the world's wealthiest country per head of population in 1900. That is by no means our place now. But what we have built in the Great South Land in the last hundred years has few counterparts anywhere else in the world. The increasing movement of people around the world, the growing possibility of working in a global rather than a national economy, the declining importance of a single country, a single currency, a single citizenship — all these important changes give Australia a certain distinction: in some senses we have been a test-bed for the 21st century and we have shown that it can work.

Richard Eckersley of the CSIRO, who has written a lot about 'progress', argues (in a recent CSIRO paper 'Perspectives on Progress: Is life getting better?') that real improvements to human life, both at the individual and at the collective level, no longer require economic growth as the engine. Indeed, it may be that economic growth as we have defined it in the past may be positively bad for us. But whatever the case, Eckersley is able to show that on all the relevant measures of social progress Australia usually scores highly, in the top half-dozen or so in most cases. You may be interested to know that we are first on only one measure — the World Bank's 'real wealth' rating, where we come out as 1st of 192 countries, with an estimated wealth per head of population of \$US 835,000, a function of our huge natural resources and relatively small population.

I have concentrated on social indicators rather than economic ones, because the social indicators are a good guide to social policy, which is an expression of our social values over time. I am never very sure what to make of most economic indicators. I don't much like Gross Domestic Product, because it includes as 'gains' things like social and environmental costs, and it excludes household and voluntary work. I'm unsure about whether or not to regard 'economic performance' as a useful indicator of anything, because of all the assumptions that are built into it, and I am untroubled by the fact that we don't 'perform' as well as other countries. It does not seem to me to be something about which one should be either proud or ashamed.

The point of all this comparison is that Australia has a lot to be proud of, and because I believe a country needs to feel properly proud of what it has done, is doing and can and will do, I want to argue to you that we need to redevelop our story, our legend, and take pride in it. That pride will enable us to deal more effectively with the challenges of the 21st century, and they will be, on all counts, no less formidable than those of the century which is ending.

The great puzzle about pride is how to stop it tipping from the virtuous and character-building to the egregious and debilitating. If we succeed in re-

establishing Australia as a country displaying an approach to social life that we feel very good about and have great pride in, how can we prevent the constructive element of that process being outweighed finally by the kind of empty vanity which says 'We're better than you!?' It's no good saying that we should simply feel proud about something but not express it; if we feel it we will express it, in some way or other, and others are likely to be unimpressed. We are human, not superhuman. I have only one suggestion, and that is that we try to remain humble about our achievements, remembering that each of us contributed only a tiny bit to the total, and that we can properly only claim a tiny bit of the credit. But I don't at all know how to bring about such a desirable state of affairs.

Connected to national pride and pride of race is pride of place, or of time. There is a natural delusion shared by all human beings at all times, that the time they live in is the most important time of all — not just because they live in it, but because in some sense all human history up until now seems to lead directly to it. In some ways it is a pointless sort of pride, at least in my terms, because no real achievement on our part is involved. But there is a widespread version of that pride which does rest of an argument about achievement, and you are familiar with it. We are the technologically most advanced civilisation in human experience. The last fifty years has seen an astonishing increase in human knowledge and its applications, and it is perhaps forgivable that people who live in a world whose technological underpinnings, especially in the areas of transport and communications, are several times more powerful than was the case a hundred years ago, should feel a certain pride, a certain superiority over past generations.

I want to argue that this is fundamentally mistaken. These technological innovations — the computer, the Internet, global television, rapid air travel, video-conferencing and the others — do not show us to be superior to earlier generations. These things simply give us a capacity to do things for both good and ill that were not available to earlier generations. It is what we do with them that would entitle us to proper pride. My earliest discipline was history, which has remained an interest throughout my life. A reading of History often seems to suggest that we human beings move forward two steps only to move back one, and sometimes three, in our progress through time. There have been some major advances in the 20th century (and one of them, I repeat, is the multi-cultural example demonstrated by Australia and also by Canada). But on the whole the 20th century, the most technologically advanced century of all, has been characterised more by its evil than by its good.

Eric Rolls has pointed out, in his splendid three-volume *Celebration of Food and Wine*, that human knowledge of cooking techniques is very old, and that in many respects our society eats poorly. Not only is there too much junk food, and our tastes for fat and sugar promise us a lower quality of life and a short life span than is possible, but the very quality of what we eat is less than it might be, and indeed was not so long ago. Supermarket insistence on standard grades and imperishable perishables has given us tasteless tomatoes that we can almost play cricket with, bland chickens and plastic meat (not to mention truly ghastly synthetic creations like 'seafood extender'). It is a contemporary paradox that at a time when Australian haute cuisine has been 'discovered' by the world, and when it is possible to have excellent

ingredients from all over our country available to purchase, so many of us eat so badly.

I do not want to get into a lament for a past Golden Age, because on balance the quality of life seems to have improved in my lifetime. But I do point out to you that people were talking two and half thousand years ago just as sensibly about what makes for a good society as we do today. Art, music and literature today are not in any sense an obvious improvement on what has been done by past generations. We have, to make the point again, some runs on the board, and we have great resources at our disposal. But we are not, I think, entitled to great pride simply for being the generation that is alive now.

It is time to bring this discursive ramble to an end. I started preparing for this topic with a pretty clear feeling that on the whole I was against Pride, but before very long I became aware that the issue was not nearly so simple. Pride is indispensable if human beings or their societies are to be worthy, because Pride is an ingredient of the personality which enables us to leave the ordinary and aspire to the extraordinary. Without Pride, humanity could not have advanced as it has done.

Yet too much Pride is as inimical to human beings and their societies as too little. To Pride, at least in part, we also owe the Holocaust, the treatment of indigenous peoples here and in Canada, the treatment of the working class and the rural poor in 19th century Great Britain, and much else besides. How is it that a sentiment which is so beneficial to human progress can at another level be so destructive? A simple but not helpful answer, to offer it again, is that we are human, not superhuman, and that we are not perfect. How can we prevent the slip from proper to improper pride? There cannot be a simple answer, but my own is that self-awareness ought usually to be a useful safeguard. A person who examines his or her life, who is engaged in a thoughtful way in constructing and growing himself or herself, is unlikely to fall victim to improper Pride.

And what about a society? you ask. Oddly enough, I find that easier to answer. A society of self-aware, well-educated citizens is unlikely to fall into the trap of over-estimating its virtue. That is why I argue continually for the education of the whole society as a public necessity. That is why I argue for a multiplicity of media, and for the public ownership of some of them. That is why I argue for the highest level of public debate, on all important issues, at all times. If that is the society we are, we will not fall victim to Pride. But we will have built a society about which we could justifiably feel proud. That wouldn't matter to us, of course, for as members of such a society we would be aware of the dangers of Pride. We would be concerned about how much more we had to do.