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The Inflated Self

DAVID G. MYERS

Poised somewhere between sinful vanity and self-destructive submissiveness is a golden mean of self-esteem appropriate to the human condition.
Stanford Lyman.

THERE IS NO DOUBT about it. High self-esteem pays dividends. Those with a positive self-image are happier, freer of ulcers and insomnia, less prone to drug and alcohol addictions. Researchers have also found that people whose ego is temporarily deflated are more likely then to disparage other people, or even express heightened racial prejudice. More generally, people who are negative about themselves also tend to be negative about others. Low self-esteem can feed contemptuous attitudes.

There is also little doubt about the benefits of positive thinking. Those who believe they can control their own destiny, who have what researchers in more than 1,000 studies have called "internal locus of control," achieve more, make more money, are less vulnerable to being manipulated. Believe that things are beyond your control and they probably will be. Believe that you can do it, and maybe you will.

Knowing the value of self-confidence may encourage us not to resign ourselves to bad situations, to persist despite initial failures, to strive without being derailed by self-doubts. But, as Pascal taught, no single truth is ever sufficient, because the world is not simple. Any truth separated from its complementary truth is a half-truth. That high self-esteem and positive thinking pay dividends is true. But let us not forget the complementary truth about the pervasiveness and the pitfalls of pride.

It is popularly believed that most of us suffer the "I'm not OK – you're OK" problem of low self-esteem. As Groucho Marx put it, "I'd never join any club that would accept a person like me." Psychologist Carl Rogers described this low self-image problem when objecting to Reinhold Niebuhr's idea that original sin is self-love, pretension or pride. No, no, replied Rogers, Niebuhr had it backwards. People's problems arise because "they despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable."

The issue between Niebuhr and Rogers is very much alive today. And what an intriguing irony it is that so many Christian writers are now echoing the old prophets of humanistic psychology at the very time that research psychologists are amassing new data concerning the pervasiveness of pride. Indeed, it is the orthodox theologians, not the humanistic psychologists, who seem closest to the truth that is glimpsed by social psychology. As writer William Saroyan put it, "Every man is a good man in a bad world – as he himself knows." Researchers are debating the reasons for this phenomenon of "self-serving bias," but they now generally agree that the phenomenon is both genuine and potent. Six streams of data merge to form a powerful river of evidence.

Stream 1: Accepting more responsibility for success than failure, for good deeds than bad.

Time and again, experimenters have found that people readily accept credit when told they have succeeded (attributing the success to their ability and effort), yet attribute failure to such external factors as bad luck or the problem's inherent "impossibility." Similarly, in explaining their victories, athletes have been observed to credit themselves, but are more likely to attribute losses to something else: bad breaks, bad officiating, the other team's super effort. Situations that combine skill and chance (games, exams, job applications) are especially prone to the phenomenon. Winners can easily attribute their success to their skill, while losers can attribute their losses to chance. When I win at Scrabble it's because

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of my verbal dexterity; when I lose it's because "who could get anywhere with a Q but no U?"

Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly at the University of Waterloo observed a marital version of self-serving bias. They found that married people usually gave themselves more credit for such activities as cleaning the house and caring for the children than their spouses were willing to credit them for. Every night, my wife and I pitch our laundry at the bedroom clothes hamper. In the morning, one of us puts it in. Recently she suggested that I take more responsibility for this. Thinking that I already did so 75 per cent of the time, I asked her how often she thought she picked up the clothes. "Oh," she replied, "about 75 per cent of the time."

Stream 2: Favorably biased self-ratings: Can we all be better than average?

It appears that in nearly any area that is both subjective and socially desirable, most people see themselves as better than average. For example, most American business people see themselves as more ethical than the average American business person. Most community residents see themselves as less prejudiced than others in their communities. Most drivers – even most drivers who have been hospitalized for accidents – believe themselves to be more skillful than the average driver.

The College Board recently invited the million high school seniors taking its aptitude test to indicate "how you feel you compare with other people your own age in certain areas of ability." Judging from the students' responses, it appears that America's high school seniors are not plagued with inferiority feelings. Sixty per cent reported themselves as better than average in "athletic ability," only 6 per cent as below average. In "leadership ability," 70 per cent rated themselves as above average, 2 per cent as below average. In "ability to get along with others," *zero* per cent of the 829,000 students who responded rated themselves below average, 60 per cent rated themselves in the top 10 per cent, and 25 per cent saw themselves among the top *1* per cent. To paraphrase Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the question seems to be, "How do I love me? Let me count the ways."

Stream 3: Self-justification: If I did it, it must be good.

If an undesirable action cannot be forgotten, misremembered or undone, then often it is justified. If social psychological research has established anything, it is that our past actions influence our current attitudes. Every time we act, we amplify the idea lying behind what we have done, especially when we feel some responsibility for having committed the act. In experiments, people who oppress someone – by delivering electric shocks, for example – tend later to disparage their victim. Such self-justification is all the more dangerous when manifested in group settings: Iran justified its taking of hostages as a response to American policies it found to be morally reprehensible; the United States saw the moral lunacy on the other side. So everyone felt righteous, and a standoff occurred.

Stream 4: Cognitive conceit: Belief in one's personal infallibility.

Researchers who study human thinking have often observed that people overestimate the accuracy of their beliefs and judgments. So consistently does this happen that one prominent researcher has referred to this human tendency as "cognitive conceit."

One example is the I-knew-it-all-along phenomenon. Often we do not expect something to happen until it does, at which point we overestimate our ability to have predicted it. Researchers have found that people who are told the outcome of an experimental or historical situation are less surprised at the outcome than people told only about the situation and its possible outcomes. Indeed, almost any result of a psychological experiment can seem like common sense – after you know the result. The phenomenon

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can be demonstrated by giving half of a group some purported psychological finding and the other half the opposite result. For example:

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>
> Social psychologists have found that whether choosing friends or falling in love, we are most attracted to people whose traits are similar to our own. There seems to be wisdom in the old saying that "birds of a feather flock together."

Have people (1) write an explanation for whichever finding they were given, and (2) judge whether their finding is "surprising" or "not surprising." In hindsight, either result can seem "obvious," so that virtually all respondents will say "not surprising" – or "I could have told you that."

Stream 5: Unrealistic optimism: The Pollyanna syndrome.

Margaret Matlin and David Stang have amassed evidence pointing to a powerful "Pollyanna principle" – that people more readily perceive, remember and communicate pleasant than they do unpleasant information. Positive thinking predominates over negative thinking. In recent research with Rutgers University students, Neil Weinstein has further discerned a tendency toward "unrealistic optimism about future life events." Most students perceived themselves as

far more likely than their classmates to experience positive events such as getting a good job, drawing a good salary or owning a home, and as far less likely to experience negative events such as getting divorced, having cancer or being fired. Likewise, most college students believe they will easily outlive their actuarially predicted age of death (which calls to mind Freud's joke about the man who told his wife, "If one of us should die, I think I would go live in Paris").

Stream 6: Overestimating how desirably one would act.

Researchers have discovered that under certain conditions most people will act in rather inconsiderate, compliant or even cruel ways. When other people are told in detail about these conditions and asked to predict how *they* would act, nearly all insist that their own behavior would be far more virtuous. Similarly, when researcher Steven Sherman called Bloomington, Indiana, residents and asked them to volunteer three hours to an American Cancer Society drive, only 4 per cent agreed to do so. But when a comparable group of other residents were called and asked to predict how they would react were they to receive such a request, almost half predicted that they would help.

Other streams of evidence could be added: We more readily believe flattering than self-deflating descriptions of ourselves. We misremember our own past in self-enhancing ways. We guess that physically attractive people have personalities more like our own than do unattractive people. It's true that high self-esteem and positive thinking are adaptive and desirable. But unless we close our eyes to a whole river of evidence, it also seems true that the most common error in people's self-images is not unrealistically low self-esteem, but rather a self-serving bias; not an inferiority complex, but a superiority complex. In any satisfactory theory or theology of self-esteem, these two truths must somehow coexist.

MANY WILL NO doubt find this portrayal of the pervasiveness of pride either depressing or somehow contrary to what they have experienced and observed. Let me anticipate some of the objections.

I hear lots of people putting themselves down, and I'm sometimes hampered by inferiority feelings myself.

Let us see why this might be so. First, those of us who exhibit the self-serving bias – and that's most of us – may nevertheless feel inferior to certain specific individuals, especially when we compare ourselves to someone who is a step or two higher on the ladder of success, attractiveness or whatever we desire. Thus we may *believe* ourselves to be relatively superior yet *feel* discouraged because we fall short of certain others, or fail fully to reach our goals.

Second, not everyone has a self-serving bias. Some people (women more often than men) *do* suffer from unreasonably low self-esteem. For example, several recent studies have found that while most people shuck responsibility for their failures on a laboratory task, or perceive themselves as having been more in control than they were, depressed people are more accurate in their self-appraisal. Sadder but wiser, they seem to be. There is also evidence that while most people see themselves more favorably than other people see them, depressed people see themselves as others see them.

Third, self-disparagement can be a self-serving tactic. As the French sage La Rochefoucauld detected, "Humility is often but a . . . trick whereby pride abases itself only to exalt itself later." For example, most of us have learned that putting ourselves down is a useful technique for eliciting "strokes" from others. We know that a remark such as "I wish I weren't so ugly" will at least elicit a "Come now, I know people who are uglier than you." Researchers have also observed that people will aggrandize their opponents and disparage or even handicap themselves as a self-protective tactic. The coach who publicly extols the upcoming opponent's awesome strength renders a loss understandable, while a win becomes a praiseworthy achievement.

Perhaps all this "pride" is just an upbeat public display; underneath it people may be suffering with miserable self-images.

Actually, when people must declare their feelings publicly, they present a more *modest* self-portrayal than when allowed to respond anonymously. Self-serving bias is exhibited by children before they learn to inhibit their real feelings. And if, as many researchers believe, the self-serving bias is rooted partly in how our minds process information – I more easily recall the times I've bent over and picked up the laundry than the times I've overlooked it – then it will be an actual self-perception, more a self-deception than a lie. Consider, finally, the diversity of evidence that converges on the self-serving bias. Were it merely a favorability bias in questionnaire ratings, we could more readily explain the phenomenon away.

Is not the self-serving bias adaptive?

It likely is, for the same reasons that high self-esteem and positive thinking are adaptive. Some have argued that the bias has survival value; that cheaters, for example, will give a more convincing display of honesty if they believe in their honesty. Belief in our superiority can also motivate us to achieve, and can sustain our sense of hope in difficult times.

However, the self-serving bias is not always adaptive. For example, in one series of experiments by Barry Schlenker at the University of Florida, people who worked with other people on various tasks claimed greater-than-average credit when their group did well, and less-than-average blame when it did

'I can't face life . . .'

not. If most individuals in a group believe they are underpaid and underappreciated, relative to their better-than-average contributions, disharmony and envy will likely rear their heads. College presidents will readily recognize the phenomenon. If, as one survey revealed, 94 per cent of college faculty think themselves better than their average colleague, then when merit salary raises are announced and half receive an average raise or less, many will feel an injustice has been done them. Note that the complaints do not necessarily signify that any actual injustice has been done.

Does not the Bible portray us more positively, as reflecting God's image?

The Bible offers a balanced picture of human nature – as the epitome of creation, made in God's own image, and yet as sinful, attached to false securities. Two complementary truths. This article affirms the sometimes understated second truth.

The experimental evidence that human reason is adaptable to self-interest strikingly parallels the Christian claim that becoming aware of our sin is like trying to see our own eyeballs. There are self-serving, self-justifying biases in the way we perceive our actions, observes the social psychologist; "No one can see his own errors," notes the Psalmist. Thus the Pharisee could thank God "that I am not like others." St. Paul must have had self-righteousness in mind when he admonished the Philippians to "in humility count others better than yourselves." Paul assumed that our natural tendency is the opposite, just as he assumed self-love when arguing that husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, and just as Jesus assumed self-love when commanding us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The Bible does not teach self-love, it takes it for granted.

In the biblical view, pride alienates us from God and leads us to disdain one another. It fuels conflict among individuals and nations, each of which sees itself as more moral and deserving than others. The Nazi atrocities were rooted not in self-conscious feelings of German inferiority but in Aryan pride. The conflict between Britain and Argentina involved a small amount of real estate and a large amount of national pride. And so for centuries pride has been considered the fundamental sin, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. If I seem confident about the potency of pride, it is not because I have invented a new idea, but rather because I am simply assembling new data to reaffirm a very old idea.

These researchers seem like killjoys. Where is there an encouraging word?

Are not the greater killjoys those who would lead us to believe that we can accomplish anything? Which means that if we don't – if we are unhappily married, poor, unemployed or have rebellious children – we have but ourselves to blame. Shame. If only we had tried harder, been more disciplined, less stupid.

To know and accept ourselves foibles and all, without pretensions, is not gloomy but liberating. As William James noted, " "To give up one's pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified." Likewise, the biblical understanding of self-affirmation does not downplay our pride and sinfulness. Recall how Jesus' Sermon on the Mount hints at the paradoxical ways by which comfort, satisfaction, mercy, peace, happiness and visions of God are discovered: "Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"

"Christian religion," said C. S. Lewis, "is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in [dismay], and it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay." In coming to realize that self-interest and illusion taint our thoughts and actions, we take the first step toward wholeness. The new insights gained from psychological research into vanity and illusion therefore have profoundly Christian implications, for they drive us back to the biblical view of our creatureliness and spiritual poverty, the very view which, in our pride, we are so prone to deny.

Christians furthermore believe that God's grace is the key to human liberation, liberation from the need to define our self-worth solely in terms of achievements, or prestige or physical and material well-being. Thus, while I can never be worthy or wise enough, I can, with Martin Luther, "throw myself upon God's grace." The recognition of one's pride thus draws one to Christ and to the positive self-esteem that is rooted in grace.

There is indeed tremendous relief in confessing our vanity – in being known and accepted as we are. Having confessed the worst sin – playing God – and having been forgiven, we gain release, a feeling of being given what we were struggling to get: security

Advent

In the fields
December sheep turn slowly,
Scarcely shaking their bell-tongues to sound
The occasion.

Watching the sky,
December shepherds huddle
At the small fires of their disbelief
In miracles.

Above the town
December stars move closer:
His Space-ship could come down, almost
Unnoticed.

Evelyn Tooley Hunt.

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and acceptance. The feelings one can have in this encounter with God are like those we enjoy in relationship with someone who, even after knowing our inmost thoughts, accepts us unconditionally. This is the delicious experience we enjoy in a good marriage or an intimate friendship, in which we no longer feel the need to justify and explain ourselves or to be on guard, in which we are free to be spontaneous without fear of losing the other's esteem. Such was the experience of the Psalmist: "Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from my arrogance. . . . I am content and at peace."

What, then, is true humility?

First, we must recognize that the true end of humility is *not* self-contempt (which still leaves people concerned with themselves). To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, humility does not consist in handsome people trying to believe they are ugly and clever people trying to believe they are fools. When Muhammad Ali announced that he was the greatest, there was a sense in which his pronouncement did not violate the spirit of humility. False modesty can actually lead to an ironic pride in one's better-than-average humility.

True humility is more like self-forgetfulness than false modesty. As my colleague Dennis Voskuil writes in his forthcoming book, *Mountains into Goldmines: Robert Schuller and the Gospel of Success* (Eerdmans), the refreshing gospel promise is "not that we have been freed by Christ to love ourselves, but that we are free from self-obsession. Not that the cross frees us *for* the ego trip but that the cross frees us *from* the ego trip." This stripping-away leaves people free to esteem their special talents and, with the same honesty, to esteem their neighbor's. Both the neighbor's talents and one's own are recognized as gifts and, like one's height, are not fit subjects for either inordinate pride or self-deprecation.

Obviously, true humility is a state not easily attained. C. S. Lewis said, "If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too." The way to take this first step, continued Lewis, is to glimpse the greatness of God and see oneself in light of it. "He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of [the pretensions which have] made you restless and unhappy all your life" (*Mere Christianity* [Macmillan, 1960], p. 99). ■