

The Double Pitfall

by
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THERE is in the fallen nature of man a double infirmity and, spiritually speaking, a double obstacle; and this is on the one hand passion, which draws man outside himself while at the same time compressing him, and on the other hand pride, which shuts man within himself, while at the same time dispersing him. Passion discloses itself by attachment, and pride by ambition; the latter, even when it has a spiritual context, is none the less worldly for that, unless one gives to the word ambition—as is sometimes done—a transposed and neutral meaning. In an analogous way, if one understands by the word passion a force which in itself is neutral and of potential value, one can evidently speak of holy passions, or passions sanctified by their object, but it is obviously not this conversion of a natural energy that is in question when we speak here of infirmities or obstacles. It must be pointed out in this connection that pride does not admit of such a conversion; it can only be destroyed or dissolved, the first term indicating a privative or penitential ascesis and the second an alchemy of love able to “melt hearts”, according to the degrees or modes of hardness. It is true that one can sometimes speak of “legitimate pride”, but this is situated on an inoffensive plane that has nothing to do with vice or sin.

Passion, as it is to be understood here, is to prefer the world to God; pride is to prefer one's self to God, or, metaphysically speaking, to prefer sensory consciousness to the immanent Self. Or again, to paraphrase the words of a saint: passion is to flee from God; pride is to rise up against Him. One may say in consequence that to prefer the world—in the form of some thing—to truth or to good, is passion; to prefer one's self—in the form of some vanity—to truth or to good, is pride; for truth, or good, is the trace of God and represents God.

Passion expresses itself not only by attachment, but also, and in a more pernicious way, by insatiability. Pride expresses itself not only by ambition it is yet more vicious when it takes the form of obstinacy. And this shows that the two vices necessarily intermingle: obstinate passion

does not go without a measure of pride; insatiable pride does not go without a measure of passion. The man who is without any pride will also be without passion, and he who is wholly without passion will also be without pride.

The prideful man may have all the virtues, even some humility, but he arrogates them to his person and thus illusorily cuts them off from God, thereby taking away all their intrinsic value and profound efficacy; which means that the virtues of the prideful man are as it were deprived of their content. As for the humble man, he well knows that the virtues belong to him on loan, just as light belongs in a certain way to the water which reflects it, but he never loses sight of the fact that he is not the author of his virtues—any more than the water is the source of the light—and that the finest virtues are nothing apart from God. Inversely, even if one tries to separate them from God in order to appropriate them to oneself, whatever value they may retain still belongs to God.

A man may have a sincere desire for humility—thus of objectivity towards himself—and may realize thereby a mode of true humility, but at the same time will not brook any humiliation even if merited or innocuous; in this case his humility is compromised to a greater or lesser extent by an element of pride, which will also manifest itself by a certain propensity to humiliate others, even if it be only in underestimating them and in interpreting unfavourably something susceptible of a favourable interpretation. That a mixture of humility and pride can exist proves that pride, like passion, comprises degrees: in fact it is necessary to distinguish between a vice which is in the very sub-stance of a man and another which is only an accident; the accidental is capable of being remedied, the substantial is not.

We have just seen that a criterion of pride—of a pride which is perhaps only accidental and not fundamental—is the propensity to brook no humiliations while readily inflicting them upon others. The right attitude is not to rebel against a humiliation when it manifests the Truth, and to accept willingly humiliations which do not involve our true dignity, that which God has conferred upon us by His creative act and which is an extension of His own; nothing harms our dignity as “image of God” so much as pride, because it cuts us off from the divine substance of our dignity. We well know that from a certain ascetic and sentimental point of view no humiliation is unmerited, but that is a question of method and not of norm, given that our perspective is based on the nature of things and not on a voluntarist and emotional automatism.

There are prideful people who appear humble because they avoid denigrating others while being nevertheless imbued with their own importance, as there are on the contrary those who seem humble because they make little of their own worth while they nevertheless underestimate others. Or again there are people who are considered humble because they seem so before God, or before the spiritual master, or before one of the great of this world, whereas they are not at all humble before their peers, which proves precisely that they are sincerely humble neither towards their superiors nor towards God.

Attachment, selfishness and insatiability belong to passion; ambition, pretension and obstinacy to pride; the two vices, pride and passion, may share stupidity and malice in common, leaving aside the indirect solidarity of all the vices.

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It is not without reason that popular opinion tends to associate pride with stupidity. One can in fact be pretentious through stupidity just as one can be stupid through pretension; the two things go together. Of course, lack of intelligence does not necessarily lead to pretension, but pretension cannot avoid harming the intelligence; and if, as is commonly admitted, stupidity is the incapacity to discern between the essential and the secondary, or between cause and effect, it includes for that very reason a measure of pride; a stupidity combined with a perfect humility and a perfect detachment would no longer be stupidity, it would be a simplicity of mind which could trouble no intelligent and virtuous person.

Closely related to pretension is self-satisfaction, with the difference that it is passive, while pretension is active. The self-satisfied person is not one who with good reason and complete humility is conscious of the worth of what he knows or does, but rather one who is imbued with his own imaginary worth and projects it onto his scanty knowledge and mediocre activity. Humility, for its part, is in no wise contrary to authority, and could not be so, since authority is a positive quality; humility is not modesty, by which we mean that authority excludes modesty, while none the less including humility. Setting aside all humilitarianism—automatic and extravagant as it may be, though inevitable and efficacious in the psychological order which

corresponds to it—humility is the awareness of our real—and not imaginary—littleness in its various aspects, together with the absence of all desire for individual affirmation; modesty, on the contrary, is the awareness, not of our ontological limitation or of our human insufficiency, but simply of our incompetence or our incapacity, as the case may be. Thus on the one hand modesty resembles humility, yet on the other hand differs from it, and this may be illustrated by saying that the modest man must of necessity be humble, but the humble man need not necessarily be modest.

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There is a certain de facto relationship, humanly speaking, between passion and beauty, as likewise between pride and intelligence: for fallen man beauty and intelligence have become two-edged swords, which explains the ostracism they often suffer at the hands of moralists, even at the theological level. In esoterism, however, intelligence and beauty are thoroughly rehabilitated and utilized to full advantage, for by definition esoterism considers the aseity of things and not their opportuneness on some lower plane: it has always recognized that things which for some can be a seduction and a cause of perdition, can for others present themselves as a call to God; herein lies the whole mystery of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena.

Setting aside the weakness of human nature, or, it may be, the imponderables of this weakness, the truth of the matter is simple; intelligence and beauty are intrinsically positive; but extrinsically and practically, they are positive or good solely on the express condition, subjectively, of not being detached from God, and objectively, of not being envisaged apart from God and in the end, as counter to God. Such was the sin of classical Greece and the Renaissance, precisely under the double aspect of thought and art.

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From the standpoint of passion, the things of this world appear in some way absolute; while

in the case of pride, it is the ego which takes on this appearance. Now, it is only too evident that this is incompatible, not only with the concept of God, but even more so with the practices of meditation and realization that pertain thereto. To combine the idolatry and the narcissism of man's fallen nature with practices converging on the Infinite—under the aspect of Immanence as well as under that of Transcendence—is assuredly the most flagrant of hypocrisies and the most fatal of absurdities.

It follows from nearly all that has been said that the writer's point of view is not that of individual and sentimental voluntarism: it coincides neither with penitentialism, according to which only the disagreeable leads to God, nor with humilitarianism, according to which every man should think himself the greatest of all sinners. In speaking of passion and attachment, we do not mean a certain natural attachment that every man can experience with regard to certain things and which is in no way opposed either to the sense of relativity, or to serenity of spirit or to detachment in general; we have solely in mind the passionate attachment which—as has been said—places an absolute value on relative things to the detriment of the love of God. And in speaking of pride, ambition, and pretension, we do not mean the awareness that the most objective man may have of his worth, or natural self-respect, or a sense of dignity or honour, none of which are in any way opposed to the awareness of our metaphysical nothingness or to true humility in regard to others; we have solely in mind overestimation of self, which is inevitably accompanied by an underestimation of others and which because of this renders sincere effacement before God impossible. Pride is the desire to “keep one's life”; it is the refusal to “die before one dies”.

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Psychologically or morally speaking, a distinction is made between men who are proud and others who are not, whatever the degree of vice; in volitive and sentimental mysticism one would say on the contrary that every man is proud, which on the one hand is false—for then words would in practical fact have no meaning—but on the other hand is none the less true in respect of the virtuality of pride which is found in every man and which can be actualized according to

circumstances, even if only in a slight degree. Mystical voluntarism seeks to cut short all ineffective subtlety; spiritual intellectuality however, operates by means of truth and not by means of zeal, consequently the remedy it employs will not be a useful and levelling approximation, but a precise knowledge of the ill. The gnostic—in the original and not sectarian sense of the word—does not ask: “What attitude of will and sentiment is the most contrary to pride?” but rather: “What in this particular case is the nature of things, and what is consequently the positive attitude—of the spirit and the soul—of which pride is the negation or the privation?” First, the attitude of the spirit: namely, discernment between the absolute and the relative, and in the relative between the essential and the secondary—discernment which entails *ipso facto* the sanctifying and unitive contemplation of the absolute and of the essential. Then the attitude of the soul, itself governed by this discernment or by this sense of proportion and equilibrium: namely, self-effacement on the one hand, and generosity on the other; for all the fundamental virtues are included in these two qualities.

Effacement towards God first, then, consequent upon this vertical quality, effacement towards the world, that is, in the horizontal dimension. All virtue and all merit come from God—we are only the reverberating facets; the perspicacious and virtuous man, understanding that he cannot in any fashion or in any respect add his personal qualities to the Divine Perfection—the only one there is—and that he is consequently nothing before God if not a pauper, would not wish to vaunt himself before men either; in other words, he would not think of imposing or putting forward his person as such. He would exercise his function, he would perform his duty, he might perhaps be king, but it would not be his individual person that he would affirm, even if his function obliged him to impose his person's agent and symbol: the king and the pontiff receive in an impersonal manner, and in humbleness before God, the honours due to them. The humble man does not derive any pleasure or any ambition from the fact of being “I”, and he has no prejudice with regard to “others”.

And the same for generosity: it must be exercised first towards God and then towards men. Everyone knows what generosity is with regard to the neighbour: but what is it with regard to God? It is the gift of one's self in contemplation, up to extinction—in the measure that this is possible—in the Divine Life in the depth of our hearts.

What matters with man and decides his ultimate destiny, is his Knowledge, his Faith, his

Character and his Activity. Now the foundation of a noble Character is precisely self-effacement and generosity: self-effacement or poverty, which implies detachment, sobriety, patience and contentment; and generosity or magnanimity, which implies fervour, perseverance, trust, joy in God.

Passion and pride constitute *a priori* the flaw and the obstacle; mingled with the highest spiritual aspirations, they become an abomination. It will be said that this has always been known, because it is evident. That may be; but the things which have never been unknown seem to be at the same time those which men have the greatest difficulty in learning.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

This deterioration is worst where psychologists and sociologists proliferate. The moral disorientation and fanatical nihilism which afflict modern youth have been stimulated by the popular brands of sociology and psychology with their bias for overlooking the more inspiring achievements and focusing on the dismal average or even the sub-normal.

Stanislav Andreski
Social Sciences as Sorcery