

The Sin of Pride

Simon Tugwell OP

*University sermon preached in the church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on 25 November 1984.**

‘Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you’ (Titus 2:15).

My text is taken with, I hope, due humility from those appointed for this sermon, and it draws attention to a kind of pride with which we, in the university, cannot help but be concerned: the intellectual pride which rises up against truth and against the evidence for truth, the sin of those who ‘are to perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved’ (2 Thess. 2:10). Our Lord thanked his Father for hiding the mysteries of the kingdom from the ‘wise and understanding’ and revealing them to ‘babes’ (Luke 10:21), but surely this is not a repudiation of intellect as such, but of the proud intellect which refuses to admit that it must always be as a babe, helpless before the truth. There is a terrible episode in one of Charles Williams’ novels where his heroine, before her conversion and her humbling, reflects, ‘Philosophy was a subject—her subject; and it would have been ridiculous to think of her subject as getting out of hand’.¹ Is not that a temptation with which we are familiar? The temptation to regard some area of investigation as ‘our subject’, which ought to be, quite literally, subject to us. But if we are concerned with truth, with any truth, we must be subject to it, not it to us.

And the love of truth, of truth as something greater than us, independent of us, is no small part of our salvation. The truth will set us free (John 8:32), free from the closed and helpless world in which we imprison ourselves by insisting on possessing truth, rather than being possessed by it. Milton’s Satan is famous for saying, ‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven,’ but perhaps the real point comes a few lines earlier, where he says, ‘Here at least / We shall be free’.² Perhaps the very essence of our fallenness is this hankering after a freedom which can never be real, a freedom which would give us our independence of God, a freedom to make up our own reality, to forget that it is God who is creator of all things, ourselves included. This is, more or less, the classic definition of pride given by Evagrius

Ponticus³: it is the belief that we can do anything without God; and it leads, as Evagrius says, to the ultimate madness.

According to the bible story, it is the self-appropriated fruit of knowledge which is the cause of our downfall; and the result is the blindness of which our Lord accuses the Pharisees, a blindness whose horror is precisely that it masquerades as sight (John 9:41). But it is blindness because all that it sees is nothing but a fantasy projected from desire or fear. According to St Athanasius, Adam after the fall 'instead of seeing creation turned his eye to his own desires'.⁴ Is not this a recurrent temptation, the temptation to see what we want to see rather than what is there? Are we not tempted even to do this with the very truths of our faith, which were revealed for our salvation?

Orthodox belief has often been felt to be a cruel imposition upon the mind, but it is no more an imposition than that which weighs upon any scientist, any scholar. If we love the truth, we must be humble before our data. And if we would think about God, what access have we to the knowledge of him except that which he has himself opened out to us? To the Arian contention that God cannot be said to have a Son, St Ephrem retorted, 'Rivers end up in the sea and foolhardy men all end up investigating the begetting of the Son ... It is not a matter that can be discussed whether it is or is not possible for him to beget; he is Lord of all possibilities ... Anyone who dares to probe is much the same as an unbeliever ... the one shies away from his Godhead, the other, with his probing, tries to make God small'.⁵ Orthodoxy would be an imposition if we were in a position to control, by independent evidence, the validity of what is revealed. But we are not in that position. That is why Titus is told to 'declare these things ... with all authority'. The church must indeed speculate about her faith; to do otherwise would soon be to betray the faith. But she must never assume that she is the mistress of her faith, to do with what she likes.

It is, at first sight, tempting to suppose that the adventure of heresy, of making up your own religion, is to move out into a broader terrain of greater freedom, indeed in general it is tempting to suppose that pride is a hankering after greatness and spaciousness. But is this correct? Let us not forget that etymologically the word 'prude' is the same as the word 'proud'. Is pride not more essentially a rather prim and nervous little clutching at the bounds of our private little world, to stop it falling apart? As Chesterton said more than eighty years ago, 'There is about one who defends humility something inexpressibly rakish'.⁶ It is loss of dignity against which pride rebels, and dignity can hardly help being myopic, if we are self-conscious about it. God gave us a world which is too big for us, he called us to a life which is too rich for us; the tragedy is, as St Athanasius says, that we opted for something smaller,⁷ which we could manage. It has been suggested that the opposite vice to pride is pusillanimity⁸; but perhaps it would

be as true to say that pride is actually a form of pusillanimity, in that it chooses what is really a very small good, the good of self-respect, and foregoes the much vaster goods which call for self-abandonment, goods like love and joy and indeed greatness. True greatness is always abashed at itself; as Fr Vincent McNabb said of the poet, Francis Thompson, 'He is not proud. He has just that frugal self-consciousness which makes a great soul abashed more by the fulness than the failure of its achievements'.⁹

Charles Williams gives a fine definition of humility as 'a lucid speed to welcome lucidity whenever and wherever it presents itself'.¹⁰ Pride, by contrast, must always be slow to welcome lucidity, for fear that what is seen will shatter its ordered cosmos. If I may quote Williams once again, he refers to religious people who like 'their religion taken mild—a pious hope, a devout ejaculation, a general sympathetic sense of a kindly universe—but nothing upsetting or bewildering, no agony, no darkness, no uncreated light'.¹¹ Will such an anodyne religion serve us when we are face to face with God? Yet it seems such a modest kind of religion, doesn't it? Who are we to brave the agonies of the martyrs, or the terrifying visions of the saints? But turn the question around: who are we to refuse the gifts that God may wish to give us? It is at least as arrogant to set limits to what God may do with us and to us as it is to try and push beyond the limits which God has set us. There surely is the kernel of pride: the refusal to accept what God creates. And it makes little essential difference whether that refusal is of something too small for us or of something too great for us. Either way it is a denial of truth, or perhaps better, a denial of facts. To pride, a fact is simply a nuisance unless it can be fitted into a comfortable and controlled scheme.

And that, of course, shows us the virtue of which pride is a travesty—all vices are travesties of some kind of virtue. Our minds were made by God precisely to see relationships between things, to fit facts into schemes. St Thomas Aquinas sees the beginning of the contemplative hunger for the vision of God in precisely that curiosity which he, like Aristotle, took to be innate in all of us¹², which wonders how things work, that instinct which makes children take things to bits and which makes their fathers tinker with gadgets. Taking things to bits and putting them together again is a faint and distant adumbration of the beatific vision. And the delight in seeing how things fit is probably one of the more innocent pleasures left to us in this fallen world. But we warp it by grasping the fruit of knowledge before it falls into our hands of its own accord (or, more accurately, by the gift of God). We take knowledge before it is ripe and call it knowledge. We clutch at our little bits of truth and force them into a pattern, when the key to the whole puzzle is still missing. We make sense of our lives before our lives actually do make sense; we make

sense of our friends, our families, even of our God, before we have known them and loved them to the end. We make sense of our religion, of our world, in the twilight of our own ingenuity, without daring to wait for the full daylight of God's final disclosure of himself and of his works. And then, God forgive us, we do battle for our truths, not because they are true, but because they are ours. Or simply because we think that truth is weak. 'Do not think that faith is about to fall', wrote St Ephrem; 'it is faith which supports those who are fallen'.¹³ Or, as that shrewd twelfth-century Carthusian, Guigo, remarked: 'Truth is not defended, it defends; it does not need you, you need it'.¹⁴

Does this mean, then, that we should never speak up on behalf of the truth? If so, what would become of the precept to 'declare these things ... let no one disregard you'? It all depends, surely, on whether the subject has 'got out of hand'. 'Woe is me if I do not preach' (1 Cor. 9:16): that is St Paul's account of his situation. Earlier on Jeremiah, having resolved to keep silence, found that he could not (20:9). Or, as St Barsanuphius says, 'I am an idiot and I cannot bear to keep silent about the wonders of God'.¹⁵ We speak the truth, we argue for it, we may even sometimes fight over it, not because it is our truth, but because we have been overwhelmed by it and cannot contain ourselves. As Chesterton says, it is a sign of humility to talk too much.¹⁶ I devoutly hope that is true! Anyway, one of the major requirements of anyone who is going to speak the truth, especially the truth about God, is surely a profound sense of the preposterousness of what he is doing. 'If anyone speaks, let it be as oracles of God that he speaks' (1 Pet. 4:11). And who are we to speak oracles of God? If we lose that sense of the disparity between what we speak and what we are, unless it be from sheer self-forgetfulness and absorption in the truth, we shall unfailingly be edging ever closer to that fateful gesture of the fall, the gesture of misappropriated knowledge. Any word worth saying originates in that Word which was with God from the beginning, and if we arrogate to ourselves the role of ultimate source, we are making ourselves into God. Pride, as the *Ayenbyte of Inwit* reminds us, is the devil's own daughter¹⁷, and this attempt to be God on our account is the devil's own sin.

I have talked chiefly about only one area of pride; there are, alas, many others. But running through them all we shall surely find this constant Leitmotiv. No one but God has the right to tell us, 'I say to you, you are Gods' (Jn 10:34). If we start saying it to ourselves, however veiled it may be, there will be pride lurking in the undergrowth. As the author of the *Abandonment to Divine Providence* reminds us, God is the author of this fairy-story which we call our lives¹⁸; it is our part to live and enjoy and suffer the story as it unfolds. And as we do so, we shall no doubt create many interesting

and ingenious theories about where the story is going. But we are not the authors of the story. And the dénouement is not ours to devise. If we proudly insist on twisting the story into the pattern which we choose for ourselves, there can be only one ending. And it will not be a happy one.

- * The annual sermon on 'The Sin of Pride' was endowed by the Revd. William Master. This sermon is printed here by kind permission of the Vice-Chancellor.
- 1 *The Place of the Lion*, Faber paperback, pp. 60—1.
- 2 *Paradise Lost* 1 258—263.
- 3 *Praktikos* 14.
- 4 *Contra Gentes* 4.
- 5 *Hymns on the Faith* 37:26, 39:6, 23:2—3.
- 6 *The Defendant*, London 1901, p. 131.
- 7 Op. cit. 3.
- 8 Cf. St Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* II—II q. 162 a.1 ad 3.
- 9 *Francis Thompson and other Essays*, London 1955, p. 16.
- 10 Op. cit. p. 187.
- 11 Op. cit. pp. 74—5.
- 12 Aristotle, *Metaph.* I 980a21; cf. 982b11—21. St Thomas, II—II q. 180 a. 7
- 13 Op. cit. 8:11.
- 14 Guigo I, *Meditations* 204.
- 15 Letter 91 (ed. Chitty).
- 16 *The Man who was Thursday*, ch. 1.
- 17 E.E.T.S., O.S. 23 p. 17.
- 18 J.P. de Caussade (?), *L'Abandon à la Providence Divine*, ed. M. Olphe-Galliard, Paris 1966, pp. 99—100, 109, 140; for life as a fairy story, cf. *ibid.* p. 50.

Descartes and Capitalism

Ian Hamnett

In a pace-setting paper recently published in *New Blackfriars*¹, Fergus Kerr argues that Cartesian assumptions and presuppositions have entered so deeply into the thinking of the West that even those who profess to follow other traditions of thought can often be found to be working within the Cartesian paradigm. Here I hope to develop just one of the many lines of inquiry to which Father Kerr has pointed, arguing that there is a convergence between Cartesian anthropology on the one hand and the productive relations of capitalism on the other. Beyond this, I shall try to suggest that this convergence can