

Vainglory is Not Merely a Form of Pride

Keith Buhler
University of Kentucky
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Abstract: Contemporary virtue ethicists rarely, if ever, address vainglory or *kenodoxia*. Instead, vainglory is often conflated with pride or dismissed as a petty vice. In this paper, I argue that vainglory is not merely a form of pride but one of three major roots of sin having to do with the lust of the eyes. Drawing on Scriptural, patristic, and contemporary writings, I show that vainglory is a distinctive craving for seeing and being seen which manifests in a multitude of forms, some familiar (such as clothes) and others less familiar. The virtues of which vainglory is a counterfeit include both obscurity and true glory from God.

Our elders admirably describe the nature of this malady [of vainglory] as like that of an onion, and of those bulbs which when stripped of one covering you find to be sheathed in another; and as often as you strip them, you find them still protected. — St. John Cassian, *Institutions*, XI, Chapter 5.

Introduction

Contemporary virtue ethicists have not paid much attention to vainglory or *kenodoxia*. I have been unable to locate any sustained discussion of the vice in the writings of Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, Iris Murdoch, Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, Philippa Foot, John McDowell, or other contemporary philosophers.¹ The first writer who brought the topic to my attention was Dorothy Sayers in her novel, *Gaudy Night*, which focuses on a character named Harriet Vane — Harriet Vane’s name summons images of a weather vane, which is blown about by the wind, but also underlines the titular term ‘gaudy’, which is synonymous with vain.

1. A discussion of pride — but not vainglory — appears in Kevin Timpe and Craig A Boyd, *Virtues and Their Vices* (Oxford University Press, 2014). Foot mentions (but does not discuss) “vanity” in a list with “pride” and “worldliness” in Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

When vainglory or ‘vanity’ is mentioned, it is often simply conflated with pride. Just as often, vainglory is downplayed relative to pride and treated as a petty obsession with one’s appearance or reputation. For example, C.S. Lewis, in his famous “Great Sin” chapter of *Mere Christianity*, briefly describes “vanity” in this way: “vanity, though it is the sort of Pride which shows most on the surface, is really the least bad and most pardonable sort. The vain person wants praise, applause, admiration, too much and is always angling for it. It is a fault, but a childlike and even (in an odd way) a humble fault.”² I don’t think Lewis is best interpreted as referring to kenodoxia but rather a petty version thereof. Rather, I take his best account of vainglory to be the essay “Inner Ring.”

To my mind, conflating pride with vainglory or conflating vainglory with mere ‘vanity’ is a mistake. One important exception to the general scholarly neglect of this vice is the writing of Rebecca DeYoung. DeYoung takes vainglory seriously and she distinguished it from pride.³ By her account, briefly, pride is “desire for preeminence” and vainglory the “desire to have that preeminence displayed to others.”⁴ Nevertheless, her almost exclusive attention to Aquinas and her aiming at a popular audience leaves room for supplementary research. In this paper, I aim to fill part of what is lacking.

Although pride and vainglory are intrinsically similar vices that can each cause the other, I argue that vainglory is not merely a form of pride but one of three major roots of sin along with pride and gluttony. Although vainglory is multifarious and “like an onion,” I draw on Scriptural and patristic sources to argue that vainglory is a distinctive craving *for seeing and being seen*. I also suggest that the pair of virtues which vainglory counterfeits are obscurity as well as true glory from God. Importantly, the concept of ‘empty worship’ has both passive and active senses. Actively, vainglory seeks to *give* empty glory or praise to some object that does not deserve it. Passively, vainglory seeks to *receive* glory inappropriately, to be praised inappropriately by others or to take credit for that which is God’s.

I. Merely a Form of Pride?

The Greek term “kenodoxia” (κενοδοξία) translates literally as “empty glory” or “vain opinion,” from “keno” (empty) and “doxa” (opinion, judgment, honor, renown, or glory).⁵ Kenodoxia is therefore best contrasted not only with humility but with true glory and worship, with *orthodoxy* or *right* glory and *right* worship.

The confusion between pride and vainglory stems from at least four causes.

- (1) Gregory the Great chose to reduce Evagrius’ list of “eight deadly thoughts” down to

2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Zondervan, 1952)

3. DeYoung, Rebecca Konyndyk. *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice*. Eerdmans, 2014.

4. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Brazos Press, 2009) 62

5. Strong’s summarizes doxa in this way: “honor, renown, glory, splendor” (1391). J. Thayer says: “that which evokes good opinion, I.e., that something has inherent, intrinsic worth.” Romans 11:36: Paul says that “For of him and through him and to him are all things: to whom be glory (doxa) for ever, amen.

seven.⁶ The Catholic Encyclopedia explains Gregory's motive: "[Pride] is ordinarily accounted one of the seven capital sins... St. Gregory, considers it the queen of all vices, and puts vainglory in its place as one of the deadly sins." Putting vainglory in pride's former place was intended to highlight pride's place in generating all other sins but for many subsequent authors lead them to believe pride and vainglory were essentially two names for one concept.

- (2) A second cause of the conflation between vainglory and pride is the intrinsic similarity of these two great vices. Both have to do with one's estimation of one's self. Humility is an antidote to both. St. John Climacus, for instance says that humble "self condemnation" renders *both* pride and vainglory as "weak as a cobweb,"⁷ implying that both are forms of pride. Furthermore, both pride and vainglory were active temptations in the first sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, as we shall discuss below. And both pride and vainglory, according to St. Anthony the Great, contributed to the devil's fall: "Having fallen from his heavenly rank through pride, the devil constantly strives to bring down also all those who wholeheartedly wish to approach the Lord... [using] the same means which caused his own downfall, that is pride and love of vainglory."⁸
- (3) Another difficulty of giving account of vainglory is its multifarious nature. As St. John Cassian says it is "a spirit that takes many shapes, and is changeable and subtle, so that it can with difficulty, I will not say be guarded against, but be seen through and discovered even by the keenest eyes."⁹ Unlike some other sins, which are always shameful, vainglory can attach to wicked deeds and to honorable ones: St. John Climacus says vainglory attaches to vices (such as anger) as well as virtues (such as patience) when one praises oneself for the virtue instead of thanking God. One can be in the grips of *kenodoxia* after inappropriate ambition and striving for a high place in society just as much after simply accepting one's rightful place in society.
- (4) A final reason is that vainglory can be *caused by* pride and so is mistaken as a form of pride. The anonymous writer of the Celtic theological work "The Food of the Soul" says, "Pride has sixteen branches [one of which is] vainglory..." His definition is this: "Vanity or vainglory is the wicked glorying in virtues which we do not ourselves possess, or if we do possess them, praising ourselves for them without giving praise to God for them."¹⁰ Likewise, St. John Climacus states that pride is the child of vainglory: "I once caught this mad impostor (pride) as it was rising in my heart, bearing on its shoulders its mother, vainglory." Nevertheless, a cold can cause pneumonia without being pneumonia. In what follows, I shall argue that pride and vainglory are distinct wellsprings of vice.

6. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 31, 45: PL 76 621A.

7. St. John Climacus, "The Ladder of Divine Ascent," (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978), Step 23.

8. St. Anthony the Great, "Early Fathers From the Philokalia," by E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), pp. 45-46

9. *Institutes*, Book XI, Chapter 1

10. "The Food of the Soul," *Celtic Spirituality*, Paulist Press, 434.

II. Pride, Vainglory, Gluttony

The Scriptural evidence that vainglory is a distinct vice from pride begins in the garden when Eve was tempted to the first sin by three attributes of the fruit:

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree beautiful to contemplate, she took its fruit and ate.” (Genesis 3:6)

Holy Scripture indicates that the forbidden fruit of the tree appealed to Eve’s palette (“good for food”), to her rational curiosity (“beautiful to contemplate”), and thirdly that it appeal to her visual or spectacular nature (“pleasant to the eyes”).¹¹ On the surface, the two clauses “pleasant to the eyes” and “beautiful to contemplate” might sound like rhetorical amplification by varying a single concept.¹² But a closer look indicates that Sacred Scripture is dividing off three distinct psychological attitudes that can give rise to sin. We can hypothesize, further, that the second of this trio (vainglory) has something to do with the pleasure of the eyes and the imagination, rather than the rational mind alone or the senses alone. And indeed, these three are repeated throughout Scripture.

A second appearance of kenodoxia as the second member of this trio occurs in St. John the Apostle’s first letter. He urges his “little children” to:

...love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.¹³

This remarkable passage suggests that “the world” and “all that is in the world” are summed up in those three pithy clauses: “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” The love of these three belies a worldly person who is attached to vain, empty things which will pass away. One who is in the world in these three ways is completely opposed to God; and one who loves God is completely opposed to fleshly lust, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

The three items on St. John’s list correspond to the same three dangerous psychological attitudes that lead Eve to corruption: lust of the flesh corresponds to “good for food”, lust of the eyes corresponds to “pleasing to the eyes” and the pride of life corresponds to “desirable to make one wise.” This parity of lists, three for three, is already evidence that we should not conflate vainglory with pride, for if St. John could have captured all that was “in the world” and opposed to the Father in a list of two, presumably he would have done so. St. John also confirms our hypothesis about vainglory: it is not just a sin of the flesh or the mind but the eyes, a “lust” of the eyes. Not just that one’s eyes lust for seeing glory but that one lusts to be glorified in the eyes of others.

11. NIV says the fruit was “good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom...”; KJV says “good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise”.

12. Technically called “exergasia”.

13. 1 John 2:16

A third occurrence of kenodoxia is in Christ's three temptations.¹⁴ There is a puzzle sometimes observed in Christ's second and third temptations.¹⁵ The first temptation, to turn the rock into bread, is clearly a temptation of the flesh playing on our Lord's physical hunger. The third temptation,¹⁶ that Christ prove he is the Son of God, test God, throw himself off the temple and let the angels protect him. This presumably plays on our Lord's human struggle to trust God. But what about the second temptation?

And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine.

Is this a temptation to avarice, political power, or something else? Are the second and third temptations identical or perhaps variations on a theme?

When we consider that vainglory is a sin of the eyes, both seeing and being seen, our account illuminates the passage. On my reading, the first and third temptations appeal to Christ's belly and his mind, respectively; the second temptation recapitulates Eve's second temptation, the delight of the eyes, seeing and being seen, admiring and being admired. As the devil appealed to Eve's vainglorious desire to enjoy the fruit and become wise-looking, he tries to move Christ to attach to the vainglorious desire to be powerful and important.

The devil gives Jesus a clear *view* of all the kingdoms of the world and offers their *glory* and *power* if he will only bow down to the devil. Notice that the devil is both inviting Christ to both *give vainglory* to a created object and to *receive vainglory* from all the kingdoms of the world. The passage thus further illuminates our account of vainglory in two aspects. First, vainglory leads the one who contracts it to commit idolatry. Vainglory is the sin of idolizing created things and the sin of setting oneself up as an idol to be admired. Vainglory gives empty worship to empty objects which do not deserve real worship – as Eve “idolized” the fruit and as the devil idolized himself – and receives empty worship from others.

Secondly, Jesus is offered a kind of earthly glory if he submits to the devil, we can infer that vainglory leads one to desire political power and other forms of social status. The connection between power/wealth/status and “lust of the eyes” is, I think, not hard to identify. Having “all the kingdoms of the world”, their “power” and “glory” means having social and political status which would confer *visibility* to Jesus; all would *see* and *idolize him* and curry his favor and influence.¹⁷ It

14. Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13

15. For Matthew, the temptation to vainglorious sin is the third of three where for Luke it is second.

16. “And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee.”

17. It is of course amazing that the devil would try to tempt the son of God to worship an unworthy object (the devil) with the promise that all the world will then worship the Son of God (a worthy object). I speculate that if the devil were to tempt Christ today, he would have said, “Don’t

is important to diagnose overweening political ambition as *vainglory* and not just pride, which are often conflated.

Thus the trio of pride, vainglory, and gluttony or lust of the flesh represents not just three individual sins but three capital fountains of all sin. As St. Ambrose says, commenting on Luke 4:13:

Scripture would not have said that ‘all the temptation being ended, the devil departed from Him,’ unless the matter of all sins were included in the three temptations already related. For the causes of temptations are the causes of desires—namely, ‘lust of the flesh, hope of glory, eagerness for power.’¹⁸

Eve was tempted with all sin, Christ overcame all sin, and St. John warns against all sin by using the same three-fold list, of which vainglory is a major part.

III. A Unified Account

We may now venture a unified account that explains the similarity of vainglory to pride and the manifestation of vainglory in attention to appearance and fame.

What is vainglory?

1. It is a sin of the eyes and the imagination, a lusting of the eyes to see, to praise, to worship, to eye the famous, flattery, giving empty glory to others for worthy or unworthy causes; and
2. The lusting to be seen by others, to be praised, to be worshiped, to be famous, to be well-known and well-regarded, for worthy or unworthy causes;
3. By extension, vainglory is a lust for political power and other high social vantage points which bestow empty glory on oneself and enables one to glorify and flatter others, including a lust for wealth, which confers the ability to buy clothes, houses, furnishings, and other means of feeding the lust of the eyes and being more visible and famous.

Vainglory and pride can cause each other, but I would suggest that we should not conclude from this fact that they are identical. St. John Climacus suggests that vainglory and pride are related

worry; the end justifies the means.” At that moment, Jesus had not yet inherited all power in heaven and earth from his Father. Nevertheless, Jesus rebukes him with the plain common sense of Holy Scripture: “worship God only.”

18. We can also note that Jesus’ temptations in the desert recapitulate the temptations of Israel in their desert. (See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3, 18, 7. and also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sections 538-9.) Furthermore, Israel was tempted in their flesh (with starvation), tempted in their eyes (to worship the golden calf), and tempted in their minds as well. Finally, the Parable of the Sower mentions three sins, which fit this pattern much less comfortably. Nevertheless, we might take a risk and interpret the first type of ground, which the wicked one takes away, as pride; the second who receives the word with joy but loses the word in a time of tribulation as the lust of the flesh; and the third, whom is choked by “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches” to vainglory.

but distinct, with vainglory being the lower sin that leads to the upper: “He who is not caught by vainglory will never fall into that mad pride which is so hateful to God.”¹⁹ In other words, the lower sins lead to the upper sins, but the upper sins also demand the continuance of the lower sins. On the one hand, vainglory, as the “middle” sin between lust of the flesh and pride, is caused “from below” by attachment to fleshly things and then causes in turn inflamed pride. On the other hand, pride as the chief sin and the root of all satanic energy can lead one into into the grip vaingloriousness.

IV. Manifestations

Vainglory has its own root; it also has its own manifestations. There are many,²⁰ but we shall mention only two: as has been pointed out before, celebrity worship, idolizing politicians or entertainers or athletes and so on – is one side of vainglory. The other side is that the spectator’s delight in *seeing* celebrities nourishes and equal desire *to become seen*, to be famous, either by becoming an actor, journalist, entertainer, musician, politician, activist, or some other public person. Even private persons can be contract vainglory in the form of an obsession with social media and how much attention one receives on one’s websites, podcasts, blogs, and so on.

A second possible manifestation is the production and consumption of pornography, which has become an epidemic in the U.S. and the modern world. This sin is no respecter of persons. Pornography use seems on the surface to be quite obviously a lust of the flesh. But I would argue that its dominant root is a lust of the eyes; a looking at unclean images and videos. Of course pornography is created from sinful acts and engenders those sinful acts in its viewers, but the mere viewing is a vainglorious desire.

V. Obscurity and Glory

If our account of vainglory is close to the mark, what virtues? Certainly *humility* – but humility is opposed to every sin, including pride and the lust of the flesh. In particular, two virtues oppose vainglory: what we might call “obscurity” and real glory.

Vainglory can be combated, negatively, with obscurity, by which I mean anything that starves the lust of the eyes. First, obscurity can mean a “fasting of the eyes”, declining to see novelties, abstaining from shopping for new clothes, or reading the news, abstaining from feeding the eyes.²¹ Secondly, obscurity can consist in refusing to seek good report from others, seeking to be seen, to be famous, to be well-regarded. Voluntarily choosing obscurity, irrelevance, and anonymity. As the late Father Thomas Hopko wrote in his 55 maxims for Christian living: “Be an ordinary person,

19. St. John Climacus, “The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978), Step 22: On the Many Forms of Vainglory.

20. For example, Aquinas points out that vainglory manifests itself in hypocrisy. There is psychological wisdom in this. The vainglorious presents himself as better than he is to be seen as good. As St. John Climacus says: He who has sold himself to vainglory leads a double life. Outwardly he lives with monks, but in mind and thought he is in the world.” Step 22.

21. Hence it is salubrious that priests in America commend fasting from worldly media (movies, TV, social networks, music) during seasons such as Holy Lent.

one of the human race.” (Rule #18) He also said, “Be simple, hidden, quiet and small... Never bring attention to yourself.” (#31 and #32)²² (In some cases, holy fools actively avoid empty praise by cultivating calumny.) Thirdly, obscurity can consist in *seeing through* the glory one cannot but help but receive. Aristotle and Aquinas call this the virtue of magnanimity: “Wherefore it is said of the magnanimous man that honor is of little account to him. On like manner he thinks little of other things that are sought for honor’s sake, such as power and wealth.”²³ Just as there exist rich people whose wealth is no danger to them because they are poor in spirit, so some famous and well-reputed people whose vainglory from others is no danger to them because they are “simple, hidden, quiet and small”.

Vainglory can be combated, positively, by the pursuit of real glory. The approval of God is real glory. And it is contrary to the pettiness and vanity of earthly glory to seek true glory. As St. Paul says: “to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.”²⁴ C.S. Lewis admits that he felt foolish thinking of glory as a “pat on the head” from God:

When I began to look into this matter, I was stocked to find such different Christians as Milton, Johnson and Thomas Aquinas taking heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures—fame with God, approval or (I might say) “appreciation’ by God.

Nevertheless, Lewis points out, if God says to you “Well done, good and faithful servant!” then you have done well indeed. He speculates poignantly about the heavy responsibility and unspeakable joy of pleasing God.

To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.

The saints are glorious with real glory. The vainglorious person then can begin to practice seeking real glory from God by the prayer and keeping of the commandments.

Conclusion

I have argued that vainglory, rather than a mere form or “daughter” of pride, is one of the three great roots of sin, and the “mother” of a bewildering array of other sins. The antidote to all sin is humility, with prayer and fasting, alms-giving, and the keeping of the commandments. But the antidotes in particular to vainglory include intentionally being “normal” and anonymous, disregarding the vainglory that one might receive and abstaining from giving it to others, giving all glory *to* God and perhaps most importantly, seeking true glory *from* God.

22. “55 Maxims of the Christian Life”, Fr. Thomas Hopko.

23. Quoting Aquinas, *Summa*, II.2 Q. 132 A. 2 in Reply to Objection 1.

24. Romans 2:7, ESV

I'll close with a quotation from the counter-reformation mystical poetry Angelus Silesius.²⁵ Although his ecstatic expression can sound pantheistic, his corpus clearly reflects a motive to humbly give God all due credit. He says:

God! God is all utterly!
The lute strings tremble at His touch...
'Tis Him that plays and sings in thee
Is therefore thy performance much?

25. *Cherubic Wanderer* III.216