

To Reason or Not To Reason: Different Types of Pride

Can a dead person feel pride? In Dante's *Inferno*, the answer is undoubtedly yes. Throughout all of Hell, even among those whose sins were not motivated by pride, Dante the pilgrim encounters sinners very concerned with their representations among the living. Their need to justify themselves to the pilgrim, however, highlights exactly what makes their pride so inappropriate. Pride cannot be defined simply, and for all cases, as either 'good' or 'evil.' Rather, as the *Inferno*, together with Hegel's "Lordship and Bondage" and Shelley's "Ozymandias," demonstrates, only pride with reason can serve as a moral guide.

Unreasonable pride is what Hegel's "master" wins from the life-and-death struggle (*Rdr.* 30:4-9). Though he has beaten his opponent, it is not purely pride of his own accomplishment that he feels, for his win was equally contingent on his opponent's shortcomings. He must always keep his eyes open for the next opponent who will challenge and potentially defeat him. No matter how strong the current master is in these struggles, someone stronger might come along and shatter his fragile sense of self-worth. In essence, unreasonable pride is dependent on others, on how one measures up against everybody else in the world. Unreasonable pride tells one that since comparisons matter, one can be proud of non-actions — birthplace, beauty, race, religion, party, etc — if he views them as superior qualities. Unreasonable pride demands that others approve of the master, but by the time they do so, they are inferior and their "recognition is of no existential use" (*Rdr.* 30:12). Unreasonable pride makes no sense.

Hegel's "bondsman," on the other hand, eventually obtains reasonable pride. This is a pride that comes from within himself, and is due to an accomplishment, his Creative Work. It is pride that does not depend on others, and therefore, the bondsman is comfortable knowing that no one can take it from him. The bondsman had to lose in the life-and-death struggle to succeed in self-recognition (*Rdr.* 30:19-20). Because he acknowledges that he is fallible, and not inherently better than anybody else, he has all the more reason to be proud of his work, which he created, and to continue acting in ways that can make him proud. And he will have no ill will towards anyone else who may want to reach the same level as himself. Rather than working to keep others beneath him, the bondsman will be even more proud to help them stand beside him, or even surpass him. When one has pride with reason, due to his hard work and accomplishments, it makes no difference if he is not the absolute top in his field.

Ozymandias's "punishment" is simply the natural consequence of his unreasonable pride. He was a king, a master, valuing himself based solely on his inherited position. His pride was

dependent on maintaining an illusory distinction between himself and everybody else; to love himself, it was necessary to hate them. Therefore, he would need to “sneer” and frown” at all around him, and, *paradoxically*, through what he perceived as the cultivation of his worship, (for he expected that they would appreciate the distinction as well), would only make everyone hate and later abandon him (Shelley, lines 4-5). *Illogically*, by being the master, he would become the slave of his “worshippers,” since he would never be free to relax his superiority act.

Ozymandias must have realized that if the world stopped worshipping him, he would have nothing left. But his position as king could only last as long as his life, so he had his likeness recreated in a great statue. A statue which, in the poem, is “shattered” in the desert with “nothing beside” but “lone and level sands stretch[ing] far away.” (S, lines 4-14) The contrapasso is perfect. He believed himself to be great, now he is broken. He believed himself to be divine, but, just like any mortal, time eventually got to him. He wanted to be worshipped forever, now he is completely alone. Even more perfect than the contrapasso, however, is the fact that this punishment could not possibly “work” on the reasonably proud. The self-validated bondsman is proud of his work, whether anybody else appreciates it or not. His pride comes from within him, thus, he would not lose it if he were banished to the desert.

Neither would he lose it if he were damned to the ice lake of the *Inferno*, where Lucifer and the giants are punished. The desert may be hot, and the lowest circle of Hell cold, but both are inhabited by broken and ugly creatures, and are surroundings of solitude and silence. Lucifer’s pride was due to his beauty, now he is hideous (Dante, p. 380, lines 34-36). The giants’ pride was due to their strength, now they are powerless in chains. (D, 356, lines 85-90). In both examples from the *Inferno*, as well as in Ozymandias’s case, the natural qualities that made the sinners so proud were so easily taken away, and their imagined separation from the world became real.

Unreasonable pride, due to natural physical gifts, led to Lucifer’s rebellion against God and the Titans’ rebellion against Jove, but they are not the only proud sinners Dante meets. Many of the shades who speak to Dante attempt to justify their sins, and, unwittingly, showcase the wrongness of their pride. Francesca, the lustful, attempts this by claiming it was all her lover Paolo’s fault (D, 113, lines 133-136). Pier delle Vigne, the suicide, attempts this by recounting the betrayals from others that led him to betray himself (D, 188, lines 64-72). And Count Ugolino, though his sin occurred before, and was certainly not a consequence of, Ruggieri’s, emphasizes how much more evil the latter’s was (D, 370, lines 7-9). In each case, the sinner is proud, not on account of his or her own accomplishments, but his or her neighbor’s faults. They forsake reason by selectively remembering, and deliberately ignoring their own sins, of which they are

completely aware. Unreasonable pride tells them that they can be proud for doing nothing, or even for sinning, as long as they have others around who have done worse.

Why do the damned care what Dante thinks of them anyway? No matter what opinion the living world holds of each sinner, his punishment is not going to change, and it should make no difference whatsoever. Perhaps it is simply that the shades have nothing else left. They have nothing to hope for, and nothing remotely in their control, besides the redemption of their pride. They really care how the world remembers them, giving the pilgrim a certain amount of power over the sinners.

A power that we might also possess. Consider the controversy regarding statues of complex historical figures. If there is no consciousness after death, or no recollection of past lives, then it doesn't matter, to the deceased subject, if we take down his statue or not. But if Dante's claim, that the dead still wish to be praised on Earth, is true, then maybe he is telling us that we do have a moral obligation to carefully contemplate who deserves our praise. Dante the pilgrim, by the end of the *Inferno*, acts as an extra source of punishment for the sinners, and he would encourage us to do the same through critical judgement of historical figures.

This, however, is where I disagree with Dante. I think that, if Heaven and Hell exist, then we mortals have no right to judge our fellow humans. Certainly we have a duty to protect society from violent criminals, but if the sinner is destined to be tortured for eternity, in a way that is perfect beyond human understanding, then there is no reason for us to punish him in life. None of us is perfect, but all have sinned in some way. Is judging our fellow humans not simply an attempt at unreasonable pride? It is not pride for the good that we have done, but for the knowledge that others have done worse. Is the pilgrim's sadism not motivated by superiority when he pulls the hair of Bocca degli Abati (D, 365, lines 103-108)? To add punishment beyond Hell would be to arrogantly claim that Hell is insufficient and that we can do better, as Lucifer and the titans claimed of the gods.

Even if deceased historical figures cannot, or do not, care what we do with their statues and their names, it still appears a complicated issue for us living on Earth. On the one hand, removing statues can be seen as preferring ignorance towards the uncomfortable bits of history. On the other hand, statue-toppling can be seen as the history that is occurring and changing the world today. Again, we might justify their actions by considering the norms of the times in which they lived, and recognizing that nobody is one hundred percent evil or good. But also, we might view statues as glorification causing emulation, and statue destruction as a deterrent to immoral behaviour for the living. If the living want to be remembered well, for a long time to come, then they will be motivated to be not only great, but good.

No matter how much one wishes for his legacy to live forever, the world is always changing, and no statue will last for eternity. Considering this, maybe the issue is not as important as we make it, and many other trifles in our short lives, out to be. Ideas, attitudes, and morality are constantly changing. Perhaps we should let statue-toppling be a symbol of this impermanence. But if nothing is eternal, then what can we rely on to distinguish right from wrong? Ideas about morality have certainly changed since Dante's time — some who he has condemned to eternal violent punishment may not even be seen as sinners today — what will change in another 700 years? Can we ever be certain if our society's "morality" is truly that? And if not, then where does morality come from?

The unreasonably proud is motivated by others' esteem, which can be dangerous if he forsakes his own reason and blindly follows what he is told is "right," without really thinking about it. This sometimes leads to good, but it also gives rise to large groups of people committing atrocities that most would never do on their own. The Holocaust, the Spanish Inquisition, the Rape of Nanjing, and the My Lai Massacre are just a few extreme examples of the consequences of massive abandonment of reason. Just because everyone is doing something does not make it right.

Aristotle tells us that morality comes from within us, from using our own reason (*Rdr*: 3:20-21). In any situation, each individual must use his reason to determine what is the right action for him at that time, and this will lead to his happiness (*Rdr*: 3:17-24). This happiness is reasonable pride. And the desire for reasonable pride will lead to the right action in the next situation as well. But what about the truly "evil" leaders in history? Stalin, Hitler, and Mao Zedong all were proud of their actions, and thought they were doing the right things, right? They were not blind followers, but made decisions themselves. Were they acting according to Aristotle's ethics?

This is one of the difficult questions I have been faced with while preparing this essay, but I believe the answer is 'no.' Reason does not say, and has never said, that it is okay to murder innocent people. They may have begun as simple bondsmen beginning their Creative Work, they may have used reason to formulate their ideals, but they then became blind followers of those ideals and completely forgot about reason. They should have realized how history would remember their actions, but they weren't even thinking about it then. By the time they got a number of followers, ego kicked in. Once they had tasted influence over people, and staying in power became the only guiding principle. Power corrupts by transforming reasonable pride to unreasonable.

To the uncorrupted human being, reason is a natural moral guide. Reasonable pride does not tell us that we deserve high regard due to natural gifts, nor does it tell us that we deserve it just because our peers esteem us, nor does it tell us that we can selectively look at ourselves and ignore the bad, to be proud in comparison with others. It tells us that the more educated and experienced we are, the more we will know what to do in those complex and ambiguous situations. It also tells us that nothing is permanent, and even if we acted good or bad once, every day we have the chance anew to choose who we will be. One can be motivated by his future legacy, by his hope that statues are erected in his likeness, but he must know that he will be remembered as a good person for a longer amount of time if he acts according to the most timeless morals. Although humanity's morals are constantly swaying, there are a few that are more reliable than others: not hurting innocent people and treating strangers with kindness, for example. If people are guided by their own reason, and their desire to be proud of themselves in the future, come what may after death, then they will do what is right.