

Jayasurya Sridharan

Mr. Sneyd

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Pride Comes Before the Fall

Over 40 years ago, President Nixon became the first person to resign the most powerful position on the planet. After two years of bitter public dispute, however, it came as no terrible surprise. American politics shows us that the most powerful men make the biggest mistakes because they feel invincible, that is, until their hubris destroys them. Greek tragedian Sophocles once wrote, “Think: all men make mistakes, / But a good man yields when he / Knows his course is wrong, / And repairs the evil: The only / Crime is pride,” and his words relate directly to Nixon’s situation. Sophocles’ definition of crime, however, is far from ours. While crime and evil are almost synonymous to us, he makes an important distinction between them—that all men are capable of evil, but evil is not a crime; the only crime is pride. He holds that evil is forgivable, but pride is not. Sophocles is unaware, however, of a recent discovery that pride actually comes in two forms: “authentic” and “hubristic.” This discovery shows that authentic pride may not be as bad as Sophocles makes hubristic pride out to be. Sophocles also suggests that pride is the only reason one wouldn’t attempt to repair their evil, and in Nixon’s case, this holds perfectly true. Scientists, however, argue that there are many other reasons one might not make amends. History, literature, current events, and psychology show us that Sophocles’ words remain valid for much of what goes on in our lives, but as is for everything, there are certain instances in which they become objectionable.

Throughout history, famous leaders have defended Sophocles' belief that the root cause of all crime is pride, and President Nixon serves as a prime example. To truly understand Nixon's hubris, we must go past the well-known Watergate Scandal and delve into the man's personal and political character, as Anthony Summers does in his book *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon*. Throughout the book, Summers points out that to Nixon, the ideas of anyone other than himself, including his wife, meant little to nothing. Kandy Stround, who covered Pat Nixon in *Women's Wear Daily*, recalls her limousine ride with them, "He did all the talking, she did none. She just sat there the entire ride...and he didn't refer to her, or defer to her." White House counsel John Dean tells Summers about the autonomy Nixon exerted when they were finalizing their estate plan, "He excluded Pat from knowledge of what he was going to do," he recounted, "...and [just told her] to sign on the dotted line...He didn't seem to trust her." He also perceived any disagreement with his political choices as a direct insult to his character. When the Senate rejected his choice for Supreme Court Justice, Nixon issued a directive to attack Cambodia to "show the senators who's tough" (363). Nixon was so egoistic that he couldn't fathom anyone having information detrimental to his image, prompting him to authorize various illegal operations, including the Watergate surveillance, supposedly under the impression that he had the authority to break the law (345). These operations eventually forced him to resign in the face of impeachment. Had Nixon ever stepped away from his arrogance, he would have realized his mistake and repaired his evil. Instead, he reaped the consequences for his crime of pride.

Hubris isn't limited to political leaders like Nixon. We can see it in almost every great tragedy, such as the sinking of the unsinkable RMS Titanic. After the ship had sunk, a thorough investigation was conducted and the primary cause of the tragedy was found to be negligence.

The engineers with the White Star Line were so confident that they would not have made a mistake that they failed to stock the ship with enough lifeboats, costing them several hundred lives (“Findings”). Not only that, but a speed of 21 knots was maintained even after three separate warnings were transmitted to the officers on the ship (“Ignored”; “Unheeded”; “Line Must Explain”). The officers aboard the ship paid no attention to those warnings because any reduction in speed would challenge their idea that they were on the greatest ship in existence. The people in charge on this ship both literally and figuratively refused to yield, and their unforgivable crime of pride destroyed the futures of hundreds of unsuspecting passengers.

Literature, too, shows us that pride is the gravest of crimes through plays such as Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. In Shakespeare’s play, Caesar is a very overconfident, self-assured man. In the very beginning of the play, he asserts his bravery as he tells his friend Antony, “I rather tell thee what is to be fear’d / Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar” (1.2.208-9). It’s this very fearlessness, however, that brought upon his demise. The night before he is killed, there are many ominous signs, from graves splitting open to shrieking ghosts (2.2.13-26). When priests were asked to perform a sacrifice, they found that the animal had no heart, displaying yet another worrying sign (2.2.38-40). On the day of his death, his wife begged him not to go because of a dream she had that foreshadowed his assassination (2.2.49-54). Caesar, in turn, mocked Calpurnia for her fears and proclaimed that he is more dangerous than danger itself (2.2.44-45; 2.2.105-107). Despite countless warnings, Caesar marched to his death, and his refusal to yield caused his wife and many other women to be widowed from the battle fought in his name.

Another example of unforgivable pride in literature is in Herman Melville’s novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*. In this novella, Billy Budd, a sailor, is the epitome of innocence; He is essentially a

child. As the novella develops, the Master-at-Arms, Claggart, develops a hatred towards Billy, one that stems from his very soul, described by Melville as “a depravity according to nature” (1384). Claggart suspects Billy of partaking in the planning of a mutiny, and when he is reported to the Captain, Billy impulsively punches and kills the Master-at-Arms. Although the Captain is confident that Billy was involved in no such mutiny, he quickly had Billy executed in fear that if Billy was let loose, other shipmen would be inspired to revolt. Captain Vere’s position as captain served as a source of pride, and he had rather kill an innocent boy than to have that status tarnished. However, his crime of pride came back to bite him, and it cost Vere his happiness. Vere subconsciously knew what he did was terrible and for the rest of his short life, he remained in a state of discontent. His conscience haunted him, and his last words were, “Billy Budd, Billy Budd,” as Vere reflected on the biggest mistake he made (1432).

Sophocles’ crime of pride isn’t just a phenomenon found in history textbooks and old classics. We see it every day, and especially so recently. For the past year, our media has been saturated with commentary on the candidates for the 2016 presidential election. The coverage of Donald Trump, however, has overwhelmed that of any other candidate—not because of any impressive policy or strategic plans but rather for his “absence of discipline [and] bottomless capacity to nurse grudges,” as one TIME article describes him (Altman, Elliot, and Miller). According to the article, he has spouted lies, painted blacks and Muslims as criminals, mocked the disabled, objectified women, and invalidated a judge’s ability because of his race. It is Trump’s arrogance that has empowered him to say these things against civil law-abiding citizens, and although he won the race for office, he has racked up a strong opposition. Aside from losing the popular vote, Trump has earned the contempt of over 160 republican leaders, including 32 members of the House of Representatives and 11 U.S. Senators (“List”; Yourish, Buchanan, and

Parlapiano). After his election, organized movements such as the National Action Network and local activists have been protesting relentlessly across the nation (Rosenberg, Medina, and Eligon). Additionally, because Donald Trump lost the popular vote, there has been a strong push to abolish the Electoral College that gave way to his election. His election has inspired hundreds of thousands of people to sign online petitions to abolish the Electoral College and California Senator Barbara Boxer to introduce legislation that will amend its abolition to the United States Constitution itself (Baer; Barbara Boxer). Because of his pride, Trump has refused to apologize and repair his mistakes, and for that, he and his administration will certainly face difficulties in earning the respect of many.

We not only see the crime of pride around us, but within us as well. I, too, have met with failure due to an excessive confidence in myself, and one particular instance comes to mind. When I was in the eighth grade, I had a strong passion for robotics. I had just joined the local robotics team the year before and was just exploring the foundations of mechanical design. At the same time, at school, I joined the Science Olympiad team, a competition in which teams build a device to perform a task or prepare for a competitive test. To my pleasure, my group was assigned to build a small robot with the ability to move around and pick up tennis balls. I loved building robots and I knew that I could make a winning robot using my previous experience. However, I let my confidence turn into pride. Within days, I created a computer model of my design and presented it to the others on my team. They had no background experience, so naturally, they had nothing to add to the discussion. My plan was accepted and we moved toward building it. As “we” worked, I realized that the rest of my team stood idly as I operated on the robot. Here, I was faced with a decision: I could either teach the two of them the basics and how my plan was to be implemented, or let them figure it out along the way. I was so confident that I

could finish the whole robot, test it, and tweak it all by myself that I chose the latter. As time got tight, I found that I needed extra hands, but that nobody on my team could help because I ignored them in the early phases. My crime of pride prevented me from finishing the robot on time and stripped the others on my team of a valuable learning experience (Sridharan).

Sophocles said that “a good man yields when he Knows his course is wrong, And repairs the evil,” and I, along with the many others we have studied above, have been a “bad man” at times. However, it’s important to apprehend his implied message: that evil is forgivable if repaired, and we can see many examples where that is the case. According to a study done by Alyson Byrne, published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, leader apologies that express remorse, accept responsibility, display empathy, attempt to undo any harm caused, and assure future prevention are positively related to both follower and leader well-being. In other words, when people in power apologize for their mistakes, they feel less guilty and more confident about themselves as well as improve the general psychological health of their followers, making the workplace more relaxed and efficient. Her objective analysis of over 150 subjects goes to show that if one repairs his evil, it is no longer a crime, thus demonstrating Sophocles’ argument.

We can turn to history once again to see an example of where repairing our course makes our evil condonable. In the 1930’s, DuPont commercialized CFCs, or chlorofluorocarbons, for use in refrigerators, aerosol deodorants, and air-conditioning. At first, CFC’s seemed like the “perfect industrial chemical”: nontoxic, nonflammable, and odorless (Rotman 76). In 1973, however, Sherwood Rowland and Mario Molina discovered that the CFCs floating into the atmosphere were breaking down the ozone layer that protects us from harmful ultraviolet radiation. Realizing their course was wrong, the U.S. government quickly repaired their evil against the environment. In 1978, just 5 years after the initial discovery, the U.S. government

banned the use of CFCs in spray-can applications. In 1985, NASA confirmed Rowland and Molina's theory and within two short years, international diplomats came together on the "Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer." It mandated the gradual phase-out of CFC's in industrial countries by 1998 and was praised by President Reagan as a "monumental achievement" (Rotman 76). The quick consensus of the major countries is laudable, and in September of 2009, the Montreal Protocol became the first treaty in the history of the United Nations to be unanimously ratified (UNEP Ozone Secretariat). The world realized its mistake and rectified it before it devolved into something more serious, showing again that evil is forgivable if it is repaired.

With all of this, it seems as if pride is the vilest of human emotions. However, Jessica Tracy and Richard Robins have developed a psychological model in which pride actually has two facets: "authentic" and "hubristic." As they explain in their book *Self Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, "authentic pride my result from attributions to internal, unstable, controllable causes ('I won because I practiced), whereas hubristic pride may result from attributions to internal, stable, uncontrollable causes ('I won because I'm always great')" (265). When Sophocles tells us that the only crime is pride, he refers to hubristic pride, but Tracy and Robins show that authentic pride may be an essential evolutionary adaptation that functions as a way to maintain and enhance social status. Pride motivates us, they say, to act towards achieving our internal ideal self-representation, or "being a better person," and in these cases, pride is certainly not a crime (274-5).

Tracy and Robins define authentic pride as clustered with words such as "accomplished," "triumphant," and "confident" (265), and we can see these traits in Steve Jobs, a man who used his confidence to skyrocket his company, Apple Computer. According to Arlene Harvey in "A

Dramaturgical Analysis of Charismatic Leader Discourse,” published in the *Journal of Organization Change Management*, Steve Jobs used his confidence, or authentic pride, to create a dramatic environment within his company, portraying himself as the main protagonist and his competitors as the villains (263). His assertive rhetoric depicted himself as a transformational charismatic leader and his followers as “allies in pursuit of the charismatic leader’s vision” (254). Using his bold persona, Steve Jobs portrayed his vision as “morally worthy [and] innovative” (256), inspired his employees, and brought his company from a decline to a major competitor in the personal computer and mobile device markets. His authentic pride is much of the reason we can enjoy computers today.

So far, we’ve established that Sophocles’ quote is mostly valid: we’ve seen that the root cause of evil is often hubristic pride, that evil is forgivable if repaired, and that authentic pride may not be so bad. Yet an implied meaning of his quote can easily be overlooked. Sophocles says that “a good man ... repairs the evil: The only / crime is pride,” and insinuates that if one doesn’t repair his evil, it is because of pride, and is consequently a “bad” man. Science, however, disagrees, as there are many examples in which one does not repair his evil but still remains modest, such as addiction. The cause of addiction is a widely debated topic in the scientific community. Many argue that addicts are just unwilling to quit while others say that addiction is uncontrollable like a brain disease. Alan Leshner argues that addiction is not a “failure of will” (75), but rather an ailment that requires medical treatment. He points out that “people often assume ... [addicts] should be able to quit by force of will alone” (78), but that the brains of addicts have physically changed by drug use. As the substance abuse progresses, what was once a voluntary use of drugs becomes truly uncontrollable, akin to the involuntary delusion of schizophrenics. Most people want to stop the addiction, but their now morphed brain makes it

almost impossible. Addiction clearly shows us that there exists some gray area, where not repairing one's evil isn't necessarily caused by pride.

This argument about involuntary or irresistible acts of evil extends to our civil courts as well. According to *West's Encyclopedia of American Law*, the insanity defense is defined as, "A defense asserted by an accused ... to avoid liability ... because, at the time of the crime, the person did not appreciate the nature or quality or wrongfulness of the acts" ("Insanity Defense"). It is used to defend those with temporary or permanent mental defects, allowing them to get treatment, rather than convicted for crimes they committed because of a lack of better judgement. Forty-eight of the fifty states include provisions for the insanity defense, and it has been used numerous times, showing that sometimes, acts of evil can arise from circumstance rather than pride.

Sophocles' words remain mostly valid today, and have remained so through the centuries, but there are a few caveats. Standing with Sophocles, history and literature show us that the root cause of most evil is pride, and that pride is really the only crime. Psychologists agree that evil is forgivable, and that a simple apology and attempt to repair it can go a long way towards staying a "good man." However, we can't simply label all pride as immoral, because authentic pride is actually a very important emotion that has evolutionary implications, such as helping us boost our social standing. We must also be careful about assuming that not repairing one's evil is due to their excessive pride. Science and law show us that there are many cases where one wishes to do so, but is mentally unable. Nixon's resignation opened the eyes of many and made us aware of the danger of hubris, and while it will undoubtedly continue to exist, we can only hope that Sophocles' message is heard.

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