



INTRODUCTION

Recently, I have heard conversations similar to this one between two people I'll call Sam and Betty.

"I find it very hard to tolerate Jack," said Sam. "He's extremely pompous, full of himself and conceited. Who does he think he is? He really thinks he's better than everyone else."

"Yes," said Betty, "but you know that's all a big mask to cover his real problem—low self-esteem. It may look like he's arrogant, but the real issue is deeper than that. Down deep, I'll bet he really doesn't accept himself."

"Are you kidding?" responded Sam. "That guy has too much self-esteem. I don't think he's insecure at all. In fact, he has something of a God-complex."

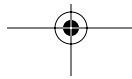
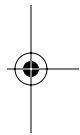
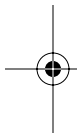
"But can't you see underneath all that, Sam?" asked Betty. "Jack is like everyone else—his basic problem is low self-esteem, which he hides very well."

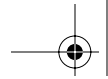
Sam quickly retorted, "I can't believe you think everyone's problem is low self-esteem! Particularly in today's world! I think the exact opposite is true. People today think too highly of themselves. They place themselves at the center of everything. In fact, they love themselves so much that they have nothing left over to give anybody else."

"But what makes you assume that?"

"Look around you, Betty. Self-centeredness is everywhere. And even though it seems worse today, it's an age-old problem. Pride is our number one enemy, the first and greatest sin. Both Judaism and Christianity have always taught this."

"Yes," said Betty, "but that was before psychotherapists really started understanding that pride is a cover-up for feelings of inadequacy. My friend, who is a psychologist, says that all her patients, down deep, have low self-esteem."





“But that’s easy to say when you’re working in counseling,” argued Sam. “Counselors look for low self-esteem and always find it. Then they think that it is everybody’s problem. Of course people who go to counseling are temporarily down on themselves. But as soon as their lives get back on track, pride will probably take over again.”

“But I think pride is never the bottom-line issue,” said Betty. “It’s not the *primary* problem. Instead, it’s a symptom.”

“I see it as the *primary* problem,” argued Sam, “and I think this is where religion and psychology often differ. Psychology minimizes the problem of sin or excessive self-regard.”

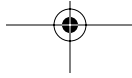
“I disagree. I think sin is more likely to come from a failure to accept myself than exaggerated pride in myself.”

“I’m sorry, but I find that view really naive.”

“And Sam,” said Betty, “I find your view cynical.”

Beneath this discussion between Sam and Betty are two very different perspectives on humanity’s most basic problem. Sam’s view focuses on pride as the driving force in human behavior. Human beings have a distorted inclination to think of themselves more highly than they should. This perspective is part of a rich theological tradition in Christianity that was especially emphasized by the fifth-century theologian Augustine. Taking his lead from the apostle Paul, especially in Romans, Augustine argued that human pride is an attempt to replace God as the center of our existence. As we replace a trust in God with a complete reliance on self, we commit idolatry. We were never meant to be the center of our own existence, and once we deify ourselves, our lives become very disordered. This Augustinian perspective finds powerful expression in the writings of twentieth-century theologian and social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr.

Betty, on the other hand, believes that pride is never the most basic problem. A prideful demeanor is an attempt to compensate for deeper feelings of inadequacy. Thinking “too highly of ourselves” appears as a symptom. Beneath the pride lies feelings of inadequacy and often self-contempt. Betty believes she has the support of contemporary psychotherapy in seeing people in this way. Sin is not inordinate self-regard but instead a failure to be a self, an underdeveloped self or a lack of self-acceptance. Betty believes that the destructive things people do to each other can ultimately be traced back to





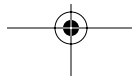
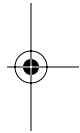
a refusal to accept themselves as they are. Calling pride the primary problem is superficial and lacks a deeper understanding of the dynamics of sin.

Our assumptions about whether pride or low self-esteem is the primary human problem deeply influence our approach to people. If we assume that pride is primary, our approach may be more confrontational, more direct, more concerned to help others acknowledge and accept their inadequacies, limitations and sins. Ministers who support this view for instance, will be less “delicate” in their sermons. They will not fear offending the already wounded egos of their parishioners. Counselors who believe in the primacy of pride will often be more inclined to point out a client’s distorted perceptions of themselves rather than support, nurture and build up a beleaguered self-concept. Exaggerated self-claims, feelings of entitlement and a disregard for others will be focal points of therapy.

On the other hand, ministers convinced that deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy represent the primary problem will talk less about sin and much more about the importance of embracing ourselves as we are. Their ministry will be based on support, nurture and encouragement, rather than confrontation about our self-centeredness. In turn, counselors convinced that we undervalue ourselves will focus on empathy, warmth and affirmation of our strengths. Both clergy and counselors will assume that we are already hard enough on ourselves, so they need not add to our self-condemnation. Why kick someone who is already down?

Beliefs about the pride versus low self-esteem issue will also greatly influence how parents go about the process of raising their children. If they assume that we human beings have a tendency toward proud self-assertion and disregard for others, parents will be concerned with developing limits and structure to their children’s abounding energy. They will more readily recognize the importance of discipline. Since they do not see the major childhood problem as low self-esteem, they will be less afraid to directly confront their kids about misbehavior. They will not worry about wounding a child’s creative spirit by saying “no.”

Parents who believe in the low self-esteem inclinations of their children will work hard to build up their children’s sense of worth. The most important focus of their parenting will be helping their children “feel good about themselves.” They will often attempt to avoid saying anything that





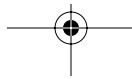
might create negative self-perceptions in their children.

Parents who believe in the primacy of pride may look at parents who hold the low self-esteem perspective and say the following: “You are enabling a generation of children who have self-esteem alright, but at everyone else’s expense. These kids have little concern for anyone else, don’t know the meaning of the word *no* and feel entitled to uninterrupted self-indulgence. Preoccupied with helping them ‘feel good about themselves,’ you’ve created kids who are selfish and greedy and who lack boundaries. Things like sacrifice and concern for others won’t be a part of their lives.”

Parents who believe the primary problem is low self-esteem may respond as follows: “Most kids act out, do destructive things and become self-centered because they have never felt accepted or accepted themselves. Rigid expectations and demands of children create strong feelings of inadequacy. When children don’t like themselves, they are often damaging to others. Kids respond to support, encouragement and the freedom to be themselves. As they learn to love and respect themselves, they will then be able to love and respect others.”

This same difference can be seen in the world of education. If college professors assume that first-year college students struggle with low self-esteem, they may strongly encourage them to express their perspectives and gain greater awareness of their thoughts about certain issues. Their focus will be on helping these students trust their own reasoning capacities and have greater confidence in their academic skills. Rather than sheepishly avoiding an opinion, students will be encouraged to be more self-assertive. If they don’t do well on exams, professors will need to work hard to build their self-esteem because these students will likely consider themselves a failure.

If we assume the overvalued self perspective, however, we may notice that many college students enter classes with an overabundance of naive trust in their own opinions. These students tend to be ethnocentric and self-righteous about the certainty of their belief systems. We may see our task as challenging the inflated nature of their claims, helping them see the limitations of their thought processes and insisting that they hear other perspectives as well. If they do not do well on our exams, they will likely say the exam is unfair or that our teaching is defective. The last thing they will do is blame themselves.





Whether in preaching, counseling, parenting or educating, this assumption about the core problem of the human condition raises its head. Our beliefs concerning this issue to a great extent structure our ways of approaching others.

THE DIRECTION OF THIS BOOK

My task in this book will be as follows. First, I will examine more carefully how this debate over pride versus self-contempt has divided many thinkers in both psychology and theology. In the first chapter, I attempt to get to the core of these differences. Along the way, I will point out that this issue, while seemingly new, is a very old debate within the Christian community and the culture at large.

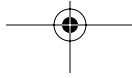
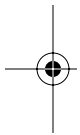
Chapter two puts forth the Augustinian pride argument as developed in the twentieth-century theologian and social ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr. The rich analysis in Niebuhr's theological anthropology, his appropriation and critique of Freud and his vision of the intricacies of pride will be laid out.

I will then turn, in chapter three, to how this Augustinian pride perspective understands the problem of self-indulgence, compulsivity and addiction. How does the pride thesis handle the issue of sensuality? The relationship between Augustine's classic understanding of concupiscence and Gerald May's notion of universal addiction will be explored.

Next, in chapter four, I will examine feminist critiques of the Augustinian model. A group of important feminist theologians have argued that the Augustinian-Niebuhr model may be appropriate for most men, but it does not adequately describe women's experience. Excessive self-regard is not their problem.

Chapter five will look at humanistic psychology's assumption, found most clearly in Carl Rogers, that pride is never the primary problem for *anyone*, male or female. I will examine how Rogers describes the self-contempt typical of the clients with whom he worked. I will then raise the question of whether or not a Christian understanding of sin can be built around the Rogerian framework.

In chapter six, after having pointed out the polar opposition in the pride and self-contempt issue, I will employ the work of Karen Horney, who argues that pride and self-contempt are always two sides of the same process.





In other words, it is never an either-or phenomenon. Horney's work points toward the intermingling of the experiences of pride and self-contempt.

And finally, in the last chapter, I will attempt to pull the insights together into an integrative whole. Here, for instance, I will argue that while the Augustinian tradition needs the input of the feminist perspective, it is also true that many feminists have perhaps missed Niebuhr's subtle and undeveloped notion of sensuality, which includes self-abnegation and self-avoidance. I will further argue that any comprehensive view of the human condition needs to see pride and self-contempt as dual processes, very closely related.

The goal of this effort is to move us toward a more comprehensive self-understanding and a more fully developed grasp of the dynamics of human sin. For it is in the context of this understanding of sin that grace becomes even more meaningful. Clearly this is a project at the intersection of psychology and Christian theology, where I believe there are rich opportunities for dialogue. My hope is to aid in that discussion.

