Chapter Fourteen

From Vice to Virtue: The Denigration and Rehabilitation of Superbia in Ancient Rome

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1. Introduction

Pride is an ambiguous quality. We praise those who take pride in themselves and their work, while criticizing the proud if they seem arrogant and egotistical. In his triadic analysis of moral virtue as the mean between two vices in book four of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle carves out a positive role for pride—megalopsukhia, proper pride, is elevated, in

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2 The most recent philosophical analysis of pride known to me is Kristjánsson’s spirited defense of ‘pridefulness’ as a necessary attendant of self-respect, which in turn is generally agreed by moral philosophers to be a condition of a good life.

3 Megalopsukhia is discussed in EN 1123a34–1125a35. Most recent treatments and translations have moved away from equating Aristotle’s term with an English concept, opting instead for a more literal translation, greatness of soul (e.g. Broadie and Rowe 2002, Richardson Lear 2004, Crisp 2006). Magnanimity, which follows the Latin calque of the Greek, magnanimitas, used by, e.g., Hardie 1978 and Irwin 1985, seems to have been a placeholder rather than a translation, as magnanimity in modern English usage is quite different from what Aristotle describes (on the development from Aristotelian megalopsukhia to Latin magnitudo animi see Knoche 1935). Pride was used to render megalopsukhia by David Ross in the Oxford translation of Aristotle, originally published in 1925. Pride with its many connotations may seem misleading as an equivalent for megalopsukhia in analyzing Aristotle: cf. Richardson Lear 2004, 168 n. 46, who supports ‘dignity’ as a more appropriate rendering, and Kristjánsson 2002, 100–102, who analyzes Aristotle’s megalopsukhia as consisting of greatness, self-knowledge and a general concern with honor which he terms ‘pridefulness’ and distinguishes from ‘simple pride’, an ‘episodic emotion of self-satisfaction’ (2002, 105). However, imperfect conceptual fits are often necessary in order to allow cross-cultural comparisons. The following definition of pride in the OED demonstrates a sufficient degree of overlap with Aristotle’s description to allow us to think of megalopsukhia as a quality closely
contrast with mikropsukhia and khaunotês, the lack and excess respectively. Where an individual belongs within this spectrum of pride, arrogance, and undue humility is determined by his relationship to megalà ‘great things’. It is not, however, one’s inherent greatness, but rather the relationship between a man’s own estimation of his claim to greatness and an objective evaluation of his worth that plays the decisive role.⁴ Pride, positively conceived, then, exemplifies the proper alignment between internal perception and externally assigned worth and, in practical terms, results in correct expectation of honor on the part of the proud man.⁵ A claim to greater things than can be externally validated results in arrogance and vanity;⁶ an underestimation of one’s deserts is, to Aristotle, even more damming: it leads to the vice of lack, a failure of spirit, mikropsukhia. While Aristotle’s analysis is constructed to serve his larger philosophical goals, the ambivalent moral status of pride-like qualities, inherent in his triadic division,⁷ can be extended more broadly to their status within the Greek conceptual framework, given the existence of a number of words that, depending on the context, can designate one’s sense of self-worth as both positive and negative, e.g. phronēma, phronēsis, onkos, and megalophrosunê.⁸

My concern in this chapter is based on the fact that, in contrast to Aristotle’s analysis, the Romans appear to have no word that expresses a positive conception of pride.⁹ Among the group of words relating

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⁴ EN 1123b1–2: δ/οκεῖ δὴ μεγαλ/σάρχης εἶναι /μεγάλων αὐτ/οῦν ἀξίων ἀξίας ὄν· Note the emphasis on the equivalence of self-evaluation and externally verifiable reality, emphasized by using ἀξίων for the former and ἀξίας for the latter, and placing them side by side.

⁵ The issues surrounding the interpretation of Aristotle’s description of megalopsukhos are helpfully summarized by Crisp 2006, 174–177.

⁶ Khaunotês, the term that Aristotle uses, is metaphorical and rare: the image is vanity as porousness, one’s inability to realize how much of one’s content is empty air. This quality can in turn lead to its possessor’s becoming a huperóptês and a hubristês (on hubris see Fisher 1992 and the response by Cairns 1996).

⁷ Such a division proves impossible for justice, which has only one attendant negative quality, injustice. On this issue see Young 2006 with further bibliography.

⁸ LSJ s.vv.

⁹ On the reasons for negative views of pride in modern discourse see Kristjánsson 2002, 111–135, who attempts to refute all the objections to the quality as incompatible with being a moral and virtuous person. See esp. 2002, 130–131 on the influence of Christian ideas.