
Humility: Theology Meets Psychology*

David G. Myers

We are all so blinded and upset by self-love that everyone imagines he has a just right to exalt himself, and to undervalue all others in comparison to self.

If God has bestowed on us any excellent gift, we imagine it to be our own achievement, and we swell and even burst with pride.

John Calvin

Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life

It is an honor and pleasure to reflect on the life of my friend, James I. Cook, and to report on some recent social scientific findings which this reflection brings to mind. In our many conversations ranging from locker room banter to dinner dialogue, and in observing Jim as preacher, pastor, professor, and denominational president, I have time and again been impressed not only by his dry wit and gentle wisdom, but also his gracious *humility*. Jim and Jean's sensitive, caring, unpretentious demeanor has earned them our household's highest accolade: "pure gold." Thus, asked to reflect on an aspect of my discipline for a James Cook festschrift, I immediately thought of social psychological research that reaffirms ancient wisdom about the deadly sin of pride and the benefits of humility.

Is it true, what the pop psychology of our age tells us: that most of us suffer from excessive humility—a condition commonly called *low self-esteem*? A generation ago, humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers concluded that most people he knew "despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable."¹ Many proponents of humanistic psychology concur. "All of us have inferiority complexes," contends John Powell.² "Those who seem not to have such a complex are only pretending." As Groucho Marx lampooned, "I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as a member."³

Actually, most of us have a good reputation with ourselves. In studies of self-esteem, even low-scoring people respond in the midrange of possible scores.

*This paper draws on D. G. Myers, *Social Psychology*, 5th edition (New York: McGraw Hill, in press), which documents the research findings summarized here, and D. G. Myers and M. A. Jeeves, *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987).

(A "low" self-esteem person responds to such statements as "I have good ideas" with a qualifying adjective, such as "somewhat" or "sometimes.") Moreover, one of social psychology's most provocative yet firmly established conclusions concerns the potency of *self-serving bias*. Pride prevails.

Explanations for Positive and Negative Events

Time and again, experimenters have found that people readily accept credit when told they have succeeded (attributing the success to their ability and effort), yet attribute failure to such external factors as bad luck or the problem's inherent "impossibility." Similarly, in explaining their victories, athletes commonly credit themselves, but attribute losses to something else: bad breaks, bad referee calls, or the other team's super effort or dirty play. And how much responsibility do you suppose car drivers tend to accept for their accidents? On insurance forms, drivers have described their accidents in words such as these: "An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my car and vanished; as we reached an intersection, a hedge sprang up, obscuring my vision and I did not see the other car; a pedestrian hit me and went under my car."⁴ Situations that combine skill and chance (games, exams, job applications) are especially prone to the phenomenon: Winners can easily attribute their successes to their skill, while losers can attribute their losses to chance. When I win at Scrabble, it's because of my verbal dexterity; when I lose, it's because, "Who could get anywhere with a *Q* but no *U*?"

Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly observed a marital version of self-serving bias.⁵ They found that young married Canadians usually felt they took more responsibility for such activities as cleaning the house and caring for the children than their spouses credited them for. In a survey of Americans, 91 percent of wives but only 76 percent of husbands credited the wife with doing most of the food shopping. In another study, husbands estimated they did slightly more of the housework than their wives did; the wives, however, estimated their efforts were more than double their husbands'. Every night, my wife and I pitch our laundry at the foot of our bedroom clothes hamper. In the morning, one of us puts it in. When she suggested that I take more responsibility for this, I thought, "Huh? I already do it 75 percent of the time." So I asked her how often she thought she picked up the clothes. "Oh," she replied, "about 75 percent of the time." Small wonder that divorced people usually blame their partner for the breakup, or that managers usually blame poor performance on workers' lack of ability or effort. (Workers are more likely to blame something external—inadequate supplies, excessive work load, difficult co-workers, ambiguous assignments.) Such findings bring to mind Adam's excuse: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

Students also exhibit self-serving bias. After receiving an exam grade, those who do well tend to accept personal credit. They judge the exam to be a valid measure of their competence. Those who do poorly are much more likely to criticize the exam.

Reading this research, I can't resist a satisfied "knew-it-all-along" feeling. But consider teachers' ways of explaining students' good and bad performances. When there is no need to feign modesty, those assigned the role of teacher tend to take credit for positive outcomes and blame failure on the student. Teachers, it seems, are likely to think, "With my help, Maria graduated with honors. Despite all my help, Melinda flunked out."

Can We All Be Better Than Average?

Self-serving bias also appears when people compare themselves to others. If the sixth-century B.C. Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu was right that "at no time in the world will a man who is sane over-reach himself, over-spend himself, over-rate himself," then most of us are a little insane. For on nearly any dimension that is both *subjective* and *socially desirable*, most people see themselves as better than average. Consider:

- Most businesspeople see themselves as more ethical than the average businessperson. Indeed, 90 percent of business managers rate their performance as superior to their average peer.
- In Australia, 86 percent of people rate their job performance as above average, 1 percent as below average.
- Most drivers—even most drivers who have been hospitalized for accidents—believe themselves to be safer and more skilled than the average driver.
- Most people perceive themselves as more intelligent than their average peer, as better looking, and as less prejudiced than others in their communities.
- Most adults believe they support their aging parents more than do their siblings.
- Los Angeles residents view themselves as healthier than most of their neighbors, and most college students believe they will outlive their actuarially predicted age of death by about 10 years.

Every community, it seems, is like Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon, where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." Although 12 percent of people feel old for their age, many more—66 percent—think they are young for their age. All of

which calls to mind Freud's joke about the man who told his wife, "If one of us should die, I think I would go live in Paris."

Subjective dimensions (such as "disciplined") trigger greater self-serving bias than objective behavioral dimensions (such as "punctual"). Students are more likely to rate themselves superior in "moral goodness" than in "intelligence". This is partly because subjective qualities give us so much leeway in constructing our own definitions of success. Rating my "athletic ability," I ponder my basketball play, not the agonizing weeks I spent as a Little League baseball player hiding in right field. Assessing my "leadership ability," I conjure up an image of a great leader whose style is similar to mine. By defining ambiguous criteria in our own terms, each of us can see ourselves as relatively successful. In one College Entrance Examination Board survey of 829,000 high school seniors, 0 percent rated themselves below average in "ability to get along with others" (a subjective, desirable trait), 60 percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent, and 25 percent saw themselves among the top 1 percent!

We also support our self-image by assigning importance to the things we're good at. Over a semester, those who ace an introductory computer science course come to place a higher value on their identity as a computer-literate person in today's world. Those who do poorly are more likely to scorn computer geeks and to exclude computer skills as pertinent to their self-image.

Unrealistic Optimism

What is more, many of us have what researcher Neil Weinstein terms "an unrealistic optimism about future life events."⁶ At Rutgers University, for example, students perceive themselves as far more likely than their classmates to get a good job, draw a good salary, and own a home, and as far less likely to experience negative events, such as developing a drinking problem, having a heart attack before age 40, or being fired. In Scotland, most late adolescents think they are much less likely than their peers to become infected by the AIDS virus. After experiencing the 1989 earthquake, San Francisco Bay-area students did lose their optimism about being less vulnerable than their classmates to injury in a natural disaster, but within three months their illusory optimism had rebounded. "Views of the future are so rosy," notes social psychologist Shelley Taylor, "that they would make Pollyanna blush."⁷

Illusory optimism increases our vulnerability. Believing ourselves immune to misfortune, we do not take sensible precautions. Most young Americans know that half of U.S. marriages end in divorce but persist in believing that *theirs* will not. Sexually active undergraduate women who don't consistently use contraceptives perceive themselves, compared to other women at their university, as much *less* vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy. Those who cheerfully shun seat belts, deny the effects of smoking, and stumble into ill-fated

relationships remind us that blind optimism, like pride, may, as the ancient Proverb warns, go before a fall.

Optimism beats pessimism in promoting self-efficacy and persistence when facing initial failure. Nevertheless, a dash of pessimism can save us from the perils of unrealistic optimism. Self-doubt can energize students, most of whom exhibit excess optimism about upcoming exams. Students who are overconfident tend to underprepare. Their equally able but more anxious peers, fearing that they are going to bomb the upcoming exam, study furiously and get higher grades. The moral: Success in school and beyond requires enough optimism to sustain hope and enough pessimism to motivate concern.

False Consensus and Uniqueness

We have a curious tendency to enhance our self-image by overestimating or underestimating the extent to which others think and act as we do—a phenomenon called the *false consensus effect*. On matters of *opinion*, we find support for our positions by overestimating the extent to which others agree. If we favor a Canadian referendum or support New Zealand's National Party, we wishfully overestimate the extent to which others agree. When we behave badly or fail in a task, we reassure ourselves by thinking that such lapses are common. We guess that others think and act as we do: "I do it, but so does everyone else." If we cheat on our income taxes, or smoke, we are likely to overestimate the number of other people who do likewise.

One might argue that false consensus occurs because we generalize from a limited sample, which prominently includes ourselves. But on matters of *ability* or when we behave well or successfully, a *false uniqueness effect* more often occurs. We serve our self-image by seeing our talents and moral behaviors as relatively unusual. Thus, those who drink heavily but use seat belts will *overestimate* (false consensus) the number of other heavy drinkers and *underestimate* (false uniqueness) the commonality of seat belt use. Simply put, people see their failings as normal, their virtues as rare.

Other Self-Serving Tendencies

These tendencies toward self-serving attributions, self-congratulatory comparisons, and illusory optimism are not the only signs of favorably biased self-perceptions. Consider more:

- Most of us overestimate how desirably we would act in a given situation.
- We also display a "cognitive conceit" by overestimating the accuracy of our beliefs and judgments, and by misremembering our own past in self-enhancing ways.

- If an undesirable act cannot be misremembered or undone, then we often justify it.
- The more favorably we perceive ourselves on some dimension (intelligence, persistence, sense of humor), the more we use that dimension as a basis for judging others.
- If a test or some other source of information—even a horoscope—flatters us, then we believe it, and we evaluate positively both the test and any evidence suggesting that the test is valid.
- Most university students think the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) underestimated their ability. (In fact, however, the higher scores they *think* they deserved would *less* accurately predict their obtained grades.)
- Judging from photos, we not only guess that attractive people have desirable personalities, we also guess that they have personalities more like our own than do unattractive people.
- We like to associate ourselves with the glory of others' success. If we find ourselves linked with (say, born on the same day as) some reprehensible person, we boost ourselves by softening our view of the rascal.

So, is pop psychology right that most people suffer from low self-esteem and insufficient self-love? *Many* streams of evidence suggest otherwise. To paraphrase Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "How do I love me? Let me count the ways!"

Self-Esteem Motivation

Why do people perceive themselves in self-enhancing ways? One explanation sees the self-serving bias as a by-product of how we process and remember information about ourselves. Recall the study in which married people credited themselves for more housework than did their spouses. Might this not be due to our greater recall for what we've actively done and our lesser recall for what we've not done or merely observed others doing? I can easily picture myself picking up the laundry, but I have difficulty picturing myself absentmindedly overlooking it.

But are the biased perceptions simply a perceptual error, an unemotional bent in how we process information? Or are self-serving *motives* also involved? It's now clear from research that we have multiple motives. Questing for self-knowledge, we're eager to *assess* our competence. Questing for self-confirmation, we're eager to *verify* our self-conceptions. Questing for self-affirmation, we're *especially* motivated to *enhance* our self-image.

Experiments confirm that a motivational engine powers our cognitive machinery. Facing failure, high self-esteem people sustain their self-worth by perceiving other people as failing, too, and by exaggerating their superiority over others. The more physiologically aroused people are after a failure, the more likely they are to excuse the failure with self-protective attributions. We are not just cool information-processing machines.

Abraham Tesser at the University of Georgia reports that a "self-esteem maintenance" motive predicts a variety of interesting findings, even friction among brothers and sisters.⁸ Do you have a sibling of the same sex who is close to you in age? If so, people probably compared the two of you as you grew up. Tesser presumes that people's perceiving one of you as more capable than the other will motivate the less able one to act in ways that maintain his or her self-esteem. (Tesser thinks the threat to self-esteem is greatest for an older child with a highly capable younger sibling.) Men with a brother of differing ability typically recall not getting along well with him; men with a brother of similar ability are more likely to recall very little friction. Self-esteem threats occur among friends and married partners, too. Although shared interests are healthy, *identical* career goals may produce tension or jealousy.

Reflections on Self-Serving Bias

No doubt many readers are finding all this either depressing or contrary to their own occasional feelings of inadequacy. To be sure, the most of us who exhibit the self-serving bias may still feel inferior to specific individuals, especially those who are a step or two higher on the ladder of success, attractiveness, or skill. And not everyone operates with a self-serving bias. Some people *do* suffer from low self-esteem. Do such people hunger for esteem and therefore often exhibit self-serving bias? Is self-serving bias just a cover-up? This is what some theorists, such as Erich Fromm, have proposed.

And it's true: When feeling good about ourselves, we are less defensive. We are also less thin-skinned and judgmental—less likely to inflate those who like us and berate those who don't. In experiments, people whose self-esteem is temporarily bruised—say, by being told they did miserably on an intelligence test—are more likely to disparage others. More generally, people who are down on themselves tend also to be down on others. And those whose ego has recently been wounded are more prone to self-serving explanations of success or failure than are those whose ego has recently received a boost. So, threats to self-esteem may provoke self-protective defensiveness. When feeling unaffirmed, people may offer self-affirming boasts, excuses, and put-downs of others. Mockery says as much about the mocker as the one mocked.

Nevertheless, high self-esteem goes hand in hand with self-serving perceptions. Those who score highest on self-esteem tests (who say nice things about themselves) also say nice things about themselves when explaining their

successes and failures, when evaluating their group, and when comparing themselves to others.

The Self-Serving Bias as Adaptive

Without the self-serving bias, and its accompanying excuses, people with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression. Although most people excuse their failures on laboratory tasks or perceive themselves as being more in control than they are, depressed people's self-appraisals are more accurate: Sadder but wiser.

And consider: Thanks to people's reluctance to criticize, it's easy to overestimate how others are really perceiving us. Mildly depressed people are less prone to illusions; they generally see themselves *as* other people see them—which may, at times, be understandably depressing. This prompts the unsettling thought that Pascal may have been right: "I lay it down as a fact that, if all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world."

As this new research on depression suggests, there may be some practical wisdom in self-serving perceptions. Cheaters give a more convincing display of honesty if they believe in their honesty. Belief in our superiority can also motivate us to achieve—creating a self-fulfilling prophecy—and can sustain a sense of hope in difficult times.

Self-Serving Bias as Maladaptive

Although self-serving pride may help protect us from depression, it can at times be maladaptive. People who blame others for their social difficulties are often unhappier than people who can acknowledge their mistakes. Research by Barry Schlenker has also shown how self-serving perceptions can poison a group.⁹ In nine experiments at the University of Florida, Schlenker had people work together on some task. He then falsely informed them that their group had done either well or poorly. In every one of these studies the members of successful groups claimed more responsibility for their group's performance than did members of groups that supposedly failed at the task. Most presented themselves as contributing more than the others in their group when the group did well; few said they contributed less.

Such self-deception can lead individual group members to expect greater-than-average rewards when their organization does well and less-than-average blame when it does not. If most individuals in a group believe they are underpaid and underappreciated relative to their contributions, disharmony and envy are likely. College presidents and academic deans will readily recognize the phenomenon. Of college faculty members, 90 percent or more rate themselves as superior to their average colleague. It is therefore inevitable that

when merit salary raises are announced and half receive an average raise or less, many will feel themselves victims of injustice.

Biased self-assessments also distort managerial judgment. When groups are comparable, most people consider their own group superior. Thus, most corporation presidents predict more growth for their own firms than for their competition. And most production managers overpredict their production. Such overoptimism can produce disastrous consequences. If those who deal in the stock market or in real estate perceive their business intuition to be superior to that of their competitors, they may be in for severe disappointment. Even the seventeenth-century economist Adam Smith, a defender of human economic rationality, foresaw that people would overestimate their chances of gain. This "absurd presumption in their own good fortune," he said, arises from "the overweening conceit which the greater part of men have of their own abilities."¹⁰

Self-Serving Bias and the Sin of Pride

That people see themselves with a favorable bias is hardly new—the tragic flaw portrayed in ancient Greek drama was *hubris*, or pride. Like the subjects of our experiments, the Greek tragic figures were not self-consciously evil; they merely thought too highly of themselves. In literature, the pitfalls of pride are portrayed again and again. In religion, pride has long been first among the "seven deadly sins." Much as social psychologists observe self-serving, self-justifying biases clouding our self-understanding, biblical writers suggest that becoming aware of our sin is like trying to see our own eyeballs. "Who can detect their errors?" the Psalmist (19:12) wondered. Thus the Pharisee could thank God "that I am not like other men" (and we can thank God that we are not like the Pharisee). The apostle Paul must have had this self-righteous tendency in mind when he admonished the Philippians (2:3) to "in humility count others better than yourselves."

Paul assumed that our natural tendency is to count ourselves better than others, just as he assumed self-love when he argued that husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, and just as Jesus assumed self-love when commanding us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The Bible neither teaches nor opposes self-love; it takes it for granted.

The Bible does, however, warn us against self-righteous pride—pride that alienates us from God and leads us to disdain one another. Such pride is at the core of racism, sexism, nationalism, and all the chauvinisms that lead one group of people to see themselves as more moral, deserving, or able than the other. The flip side of being proud of our individual and group achievements, and taking credit for them, is blaming the poor for their poverty and the oppressed for their oppression.

Samuel Johnson recognized this in one of his eighteenth-century *Sermons*: "He that overvalues himself will undervalue others, and he that undervalues others will oppress them." The Nazi atrocities were rooted not in self-conscious feelings of German inferiority but in Aryan pride. The arms race was fed by a national pride that enabled each nation to perceive its own motives as righteously defensive, the other's as hostile. The positive thinking apostle, Dale Carnegie, foresaw the danger in 1936: "Each nation feels superior to other nations. That breeds patriotism—and wars."¹¹

For centuries, pride has therefore been considered the fundamental sin, the original sin. Vain self-love corrodes human community and erodes our sense of dependence on one another and on God. If I seem confident about the pervasiveness and potency of pride, it is not because we have invented a new idea, but rather because the new findings reaffirm a very old idea.

All this, to be sure, is not the whole story. As Pascal taught, no single truth is ever sufficient, because the world is not simple. Any truth separated from its complementary truth is a half-truth. Although it is true that self-serving pride is prevalent and at times socially perilous, it also is true that healthy self-esteem, feelings of control, and a positive optimism pay dividends. There is a power to possibility-filled positive thinking. But that story is for another bedtime.

Finally, if pride is akin to the self-serving bias, then what is humility? Is it self-contempt? Or can we be self-affirming and self-accepting without a self-serving bias? To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, humility is not handsome people trying to believe they are ugly and clever people trying to believe they are fools. (False modesty can actually be a cover for pride in one's better-than-average humility.) True humility is more like self-forgetfulness than false modesty. As Dennis Voskuil has written, the refreshing Gospel promise is "not that we have been freed by Christ to love ourselves, but that we are free from self-obsession. Not that the cross frees us *for* the ego trip but that the cross frees us *from* the ego trip."¹² This leaves people free to rejoice in their special talents and, with the same honesty, to recognize others.

Obviously, true humility is a state not easily attained. "If anyone would like to acquire humility," offered C. S. Lewis, "I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too." The way to take this first step, continued Lewis, is to glimpse the greatness of God and see oneself in light of it. "He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of the pretensions which [have] made you restless and unhappy all your life."¹³

To be self-affirming yet self-forgetful, positive yet realistic, grace-filled and unpretentious—that is the Christian vision of abundant life, a life epitomized by my friend, gentleman-scholar James I. Cook.

ENDNOTES

1. C.R. Rogers, Reinhold Niebuhr's "The Self and the Dramas of History: A Criticism," *Pastoral Psychology*, 9 (1958), 15-17.
2. J. Powell, *Happiness Is an Inside Job* (Valencia, CA: Tabor, 1989).
3. Groucho Marx, *Groucho and Me* (New York: Dell, 1960).
4. *Toronto News* (1977, July 26).
5. M. Ross and F. Sicol, "Egocentric Biases in Availability and Attribution," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37 (1979), 322-336.
6. Neil Weinstein, "Unrealistic Optimism About Future Life Events," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39 (1980), 806-820; and "Unrealistic Optimism About Susceptibility to Health Problems," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 5 (1982), 441-460.
7. Shelley Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
8. Abraham Tesser, "Toward a Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model of Social Behavior," in L. Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21 (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1988).
9. Barry Schlenker, "Egocentric Perceptions in Cooperative Groups: A Conceptualization and Research Review," *Final Report*, Office of Naval Research Grant NR 170-797, 1976); Barry Schlenker and R. Miller, "Egocentrism in Groups: Self-serving Biases or Logical Information Processing?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35 (1977b), 755-764; and Barry Schlenker and R. Miller, "Group Cohesiveness As a Determinant of Egocentric Perceptions in Cooperative Groups," *Human Relations*, 30 (1977a), 1039-1055.
10. H. W. Spiegel, *The Growth of Economic Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1971).
11. D. Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Pocket Books, 1936/1964), 102.

^{12.} D. Voskuil, *Mountains into Goldmines: Robert Schuller and the Gospel of Success* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 147-48.

^{13.} C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 99.