

## Hubris and Humility

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### *Pride goeth before a fall*

**A** hare challenges a tortoise to a race. How can he lose? He's certainly faster than a plodding turtle. At the start, the hare launches himself forward, sprinting so far ahead that he decides to rest a bit and perhaps take a little snooze. The tortoise, meanwhile, plods along, sure and steady. Waking up, the hare stretches, yawns, then notices that—yikes! The tortoise is about to cross the finish line! The hare dashes toward the goal, but to no avail. He loses the race.<sup>1</sup> Why?

The hare's loss is a perfect example of hubris—excessive pride, overconfidence, and arrogance. Art and literature abound with incidences of hubris. In mythology, the mortal Arachne was a talented weaver and bragged that she could beat the goddess Athena in a weaving competition. Gods do not like this kind of affront, so Athena agreed to the contest. When Arachne wove a tapestry that depicted gods unfavorably, Athena was enraged and changed Arachne into a spider, so she and her descendants would weave forever.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps one of the most egregious examples of hubris occurs in Isaiah 14:12-21. The angel Lucifer boasts, "I will raise my throne above the stars of God...I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High."<sup>3</sup> He is of course cast out of Heaven due to his arrogance, "You are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit."<sup>3</sup> As described by John Milton in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Lucifer saves face by declaring, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."<sup>4</sup> The name Lucifer derives from the Latin word for light; in Gustave Dore's woodblock illustration, a shaft of light from Heaven illuminates Lucifer as he falls toward the Earth and the darkness below.<sup>4</sup> The "stars of God" watch silently as Lucifer hurtles through the clouds.

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Gustave Dore. Illustration of Lucifer's Fall from Heaven (1866) from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).

Gustave Doré - <https://digital.lib.buffalo.edu/items/show/1007>

Many literary characters exhibit the hubris that eventually dooms them. Captain Ahab, in his quest for the white whale in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, disregards the safety of himself, his ship, and his crew to exact his revenge on the giant creature. Of course, only one person survives to tell the tale.<sup>5</sup> In William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, the title character's overweening ambition compels him to murder the king in his effort to secure the crown. Lady Macbeth



Frederic Edwin Church.  
*The Icebergs*. 1861.  
Dallas Museum of Art.

goads him to complete the deed, and both die violently, he by Macduff and she by suicide.<sup>6</sup> Karma.

Public figures are not exempt from traits of hubris. Professional cyclist Lance Armstrong, for example, faced accusations of doping for years but successfully eluded investigators until finally admitting his guilt. His arrogance cost him sponsorships, brought myriad lawsuits, and earned him an “epic downfall...that stands out in the history of professional sports,” according to CNN reporter Josh Levs.<sup>7</sup> Hubris is not always arrogance, however, as snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis learned at the 2006 Winter Olympics. Comfortably ahead in her race, she began to show off, lost her footing, and lost the gold medal due simply to overconfidence, ruefully lamenting, “As a snowboarder, I bow my head in shame...I was having fun. I messed up.”<sup>8</sup>

Frederick Edwin Church’s painting *The Icebergs* illustrates the hubris of man vs. nature. Huge icebergs rise majestically from the ocean as the afternoon light from the setting sun casts shadows across the layers of ice, revealing shades of blue and green. A solitary brown boulder rests on an ice shelf at the right. A broken ship’s mast lies at the lower left, reminding men that arrogance and overconfidence could scuttle exploration plans if Mother Nature has other ideas.

Hubris is also evident in the poem *Ozymandias*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley.<sup>9</sup> The theme of both this sonnet and the oil painting *The Icebergs* is the same: the arrogance and self-importance of mankind are humbled in the face of implacable Nature.

*I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”*

***Humility is perfect quietness of the heart.***

—Andrew Murray

Hubris and humility are two sides of the same coin—opposites, oil and water. While hubris boasts with excessive pride, humility goes about its way quietly,

free from pride or arrogance. In the Old Testament 2 Kings 5, Naaman is an army commander with a strong reputation, but he is felled by leprosy. Shunned by all, he seeks healing. A servant advises him to bathe in the River Jordan seven times. Advice from a servant? Please. Naaman's suffering increases until, in desperation, he immerses himself seven times in the river. By humbling himself, his flesh is healed.<sup>3</sup> An iconic example of humility in the Bible occurs in John 13:1-20 when Jesus washes the feet of His disciples. As Jesus dons the garb of a servant and begins to wash their feet, the disciples are taken aback. "You will never wash my feet!" declares Peter. Jesus explains, "I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you," implying that as He served them, they should serve others.<sup>3</sup>

In Stephen Spielberg's movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Nazis seek the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper, convinced that the Grail will grant them everlasting life. Jones tracks one Nazi to a hidden chamber in which the Grail Knight guards a variety of chalices. The knight warns that they must choose which cup they believe is the Holy Grail, but that an incorrect choice will be fatal. The Nazi reasons that since Jesus was touted as the Son of God and the source of Christianity, His chalice would be ornate. The Nazi's hubris leads him to choose the wrong chalice and so dies. Jones reasons that since Jesus was a humble person, His chalice would be a simple wooden cup as befits a carpenter. Jones chooses correctly and lives.<sup>10</sup> A 16<sup>th</sup> century woodcut depicts "The Triumph of the Eucharist, Christ as the Man of Sorrows supported by two angels standing in a chalice."<sup>11</sup> Although the base of this chalice is more ornate than the one Indiana Jones chose, the cup itself is plain, reflecting the message of the movie: humility triumphs over hubris.

The magic number in fairy tales is three: The Three Bears, The Three Little Pigs, being granted three wishes, etc. Many stories focus on three brothers who set out on a quest, but only one is successful. In a typical scenario, the first young man meets an old crone who asks for help. He can't be bothered since he and his mission are too important to take the time. He returns home a failure. The second brother's



The Triumph of the Eucharist. Woodcut. Italian. ca. 1550-1600.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.

behavior and fate are the same. The third brother, usually the youngest, meets the old woman and stops to help. His reward is achieving his goal. While the hubris of his older brothers ensures their failure, the humility of the younger brother ensures his success.

In *The Emperor's New Clothes*, by Hans Christian Andersen, the emperor is conned by two rascals who convince him to purchase and wear a set of beautiful robes. He sees nothing in their hands but is too vain to admit it. They fuss as they remove his clothing and adorn him with these "clothes," fawning over how handsome he looks. When the emperor parades through the town, showing off his finery, only a small boy is brave enough to shout that the emperor has

no clothes on! The emperor is humbled before all the townspeople due to his vanity.<sup>12</sup>

Although many public figures seem steeped in hubris, there are exceptions. Unlike the “King of Kings” Ozymandias, the 11<sup>th</sup> century King Canute of the North Sea Empire recognized the limited power of the throne. He stood on the ocean shore and commanded the tide to stop. That did not end well. This humble demonstration proved to his courtiers that kings are not omnipotent.<sup>13</sup>

George Washington was unanimously elected as the first president of the United States in 1789 and served two terms until 1797. A popular president, when asked to serve a third term, he refused, pointing out in his farewell address the importance of self-discipline and moderation.<sup>14</sup> According to information published by the Bill of Rights Institute, Washington “was moderate in his desire for power...and warned against leaders who have a ‘love of power’ as dangerous to liberty.” He rejected, for example, the fancy titles suggested by others and adopted the simple “Mr. President.” He was conscious of his position as a role model and “applied the values he held dear in private to his public life.”<sup>14</sup> Washington’s humility in declining a third term in office set a precedent for presidential term limits.

A humble character is to be desired. It is important, however, to guard that humility does not slide into pretention or affectation. In her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen warns through her character Mr. Darcy, “Nothing is more deceitful than the appearance of humility. It is often only carelessness of opinion, and sometimes an indirect boast.”<sup>15</sup> Or as moral and social philosopher Eric Hoffer states in *The True Believer*, “The vanity of the selfless, even those who practice utmost humility, is boundless.”<sup>16</sup>

In times of great uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, “experts” should be cautious about their pronouncements.

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