

THE ANATOMY OF CONCEIT.

Every man sees with his own eyes. He discovers in the world only what his capacity and range of vision fit him to see. So every man thinks and judges and estimates other men and himself according to standards and limitations peculiar to his own mind. The eye of the soul has its limit of vision. Many a man has no right estimate of his fellow men, because he measures them by the false standards of his own thinking. Still more men have no right estimate of themselves. Wrong estimates of others and of ourselves are sure to be found together sooner or later; they spring from the same root, namely, a bad standard or a false application of good standards. In this way a man may either underestimate or overestimate himself. Thus arises conceit. This quality is simply erroneous self-measurement.

Conceit implies a narrow and superficial knowledge of the world. As in perception we determine the size of things by comparison of them with other things, so we estimate men and ourselves by comparison. The earth seems very great to us when we cross its oceans and traverse its continents. But when we pursue the astronomer's reasoning, and learn that there are worlds in comparison with which our planet is little more than a floating particle of dust, our estimate of its relative size and importance is wholly changed. A better knowledge of the universe humbles our judgment concerning our world as a part of the creation of God. In like manner, all self-estimates are relative. In self-conceit, man dwarfs the universe in order to magnify himself. With a true conception of the majesty of the universe, and of the wisdom and power revealed in it, conceit is impossible. The mind is overwhelmed with the impression of its weakness in the presence of that gigantic system of things in which it finds itself.

It follows that conceit springs from ignorance and thoughtlessness. It is consistent only with narrow views of the world and of life. It makes precisely the mistake of the old astronomy, which supposed our world to be the central and largest one of the system, simply because it knew so little of other worlds. The conceited man magnifies his own importance only because he does not know what real greatness is. He is great in his own eyes only because his eyes can see nothing truly great.

Conceit arises from a low estimate of other men. Estimates of ourselves, as well as of other men, are relative. All self-measurements involve measurement of others. It results from this, that there is no way by which the conceit can be taken out of a man so effectually as by bringing him into a clear comparison and sharp competition with other men. This is the reason why it has become proverbial that school-life – especially college-life – will be likely to cure boys and young men of their conceit. In the class-room they are brought into close competition, in which even the best scholar is sure to be sometimes outdone by other men. Thus every man is frequently compelled to a tacit acknowledgement of others' superiority, and that in their very presence. This kind of life forbids to men the easy and flattering method of "comparing themselves with themselves," which is the great promoter of conceit.

This is the reason why the process of education tends to cure conceit. The men who recover from it least, are the men who have too little perception to discover clearly, or too little sensitiveness to feel keenly, the superiority of others. The same principle holds in the great school of life. No man can remain persistently conceited, who has any adequate appreciation of the merits and attainments of his fellow-men. A man may be conscious that he has done his best, and may feel a keen satisfaction in this fact; but any large knowledge of men will show him how often his work has been equaled and surpassed. The real scholar is compelled to think modestly of his productions; for he well knows how thorough and successful have been the labors of

others in the same or similar fields. He who is most likely to suppose that he has done a great service to science, is the tyro who does not know what others have accomplished.

We estimate ourselves by comparison. The more widely and truly we know men, the more we shall see we are frequently equaled and surpassed. Candid estimates of ourselves by comparison with others will make us think soberly, and judge ourselves modestly. Conceit has no more fruitful root than a narrow knowledge and prejudiced estimate of the labors and worth of others.

Conceit involves a faulty self-knowledge. It is noticeable that a man who thinks most highly of himself is one of whom others think least highly. The conceited man has only one ardent admirer – that is himself. The world knows most men better than men know themselves, and at this point "this wise world is mainly right." A true self-knowledge reveals our faults to us, and gives us a true view of ourselves. It lets the light in upon our narrow prejudices, and makes us ashamed of them. It discloses the insufficient grounds of many of our judgments, and unearths the subtle processes of our self-deception. It lays bare the operation of motives, and shows how often conscience itself is made a convenience. Self-knowledge humbles a man. Those who think themselves complete beyond other men commonly stand alone in that opinion. They think themselves complete only because, while they keenly perceive others' faults, they are blind to their own.

In this view lies almost the only excuse which can be given for the man of inordinate self-conceit. It implies intellectual weakness, an incapacity for keen discernment, an inability to study successfully one's self and others. It may be a mental quite as much as a moral fault, though it is usually both. In both views it is a quality whose development is to be dreaded and checked with the utmost promptness and sternness. No trait of character conveys a more unfavorable impression; none so quickly excites disgust; none

provokes such constant and universal ridicule. The ancient proverb expresses the world's verdict on this point: "Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him."

Conceit is a mark of smallness of soul. It is a phase of selfishness. Conceit is essential littleness. It means small thoughts of the world and of other men; low ideals of character and attainment; weak and narrow conceptions of duty. It is the mark of a self-centered life; and the life which makes self the center is as much smaller than the true life as the idea which made our earth the center of the universe was beneath the true conception of the solar system. "Conceit, in weakest bodies strongest works," said Shakespeare. The men who have been servants of humanity – the great reformers and philanthropists – have been freest from conceit. They were great in humility; for humility, rightly understood, is essential greatness. Humility is the quality which leads men to serve others; conceit, the quality which leads them to serve themselves.

Traced to its deepest root, therefore, conceit is a fruit of fundamentally defective character. It implies a lack of appreciation of God's greatness, before which every thoughtful mind should stand with reverence and humility, and the proofs of which in the world, in man, and in history, might well impress every person with his own feebleness and insignificance. It implies a want of generous sympathy and kindly appreciation of others. It gives rise to cynicism and misanthropy. The conceited man helps nobody, unless he does it in order that he may thereby indirectly help himself. He is as intolerant of other men's faults as he is tolerant of his own.

Like all other qualities, conceit grows by indulgence. It is as subtle as counterfeit virtue, with which it has close affinity. It is as mischievous as self-deception, of whose essence it partakes. The analysis of this trait lays bare its inherent meanness, and shows it to belong to a type of life which is unworthy of any noble, generous, aspiring soul.

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