

The Conceit of Self-Loathing

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Abstract This article explores the psychological intricacies of the Theravādin interpretation of the “conceit of inferiority” (*omāna*), which is considered to be one of the standard types of pride or conceit (*māna*). Considering oneself inferior involves an inflated and contrived construction of oneself, akin to other varieties of conceit. Yet *omāna* is a curious form of pride, involving as it does much self-abasement, and even loathing and despising of oneself. Drawing primarily on Abhidhamma canonical and commentarial texts, the article investigates how this conceit illuminates subtle forms of self-affirmation, the affective aspects of self-assessment, and the socially determined dimensions of self-knowledge. The article also offers some comparative considerations with ideals of humility in western traditions.

Keywords Pride · Conceit · Humility · Self-loathing · Theravāda · Moral psychology

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has remarked on his initial surprise in encountering the concept of self-hatred or self-loathing in conversations with his western followers, finding the notion at first “incoherent” (Dalai Lama 1999, p. 115). In the Dalai Lama’s view, self-loathing is problematic because he believes that all people have the fundamental desire to be happy and avoid suffering, and the idea of regarding oneself as worthless seems to contradict a basic principle of self-interest. But he now concedes though contact and conversation with western psychologists that self-contempt is possible, though it involves a basic error of self-evaluation. This occurs through a loss of “all sense of perspective” and a “narrowing of vision” resulting in despair (p. 116).

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Although the idea of self-loathing may be foreign to the Dalai Lama's tradition, a small but fascinating strain of Theravāda thought is well acquainted with several varieties of it. Intriguingly, in this tradition self-loathing is configured as a type of conceit (*māna*). Along with other varieties of conceit with which we are familiar, such as pride and an inflated opinion of oneself, self-loathing or, more technically, the "conceit of inferiority" (*omāna*), is well-attested in both Sutta and Abhidhamma texts. The *Aṅguttara*, for example, states that in addition to giving up thinking too well of oneself one must abandon thinking too badly of oneself (A.iii.444; A.iii.428; Vbh 345).¹ Self-contempt is defined as the conceit [of thinking] "I am inferior," and involves a sharp sense of one's baseness and inadequacy vis-à-vis others. There is even an excessive variety of it called "self-abasement" (*atinipāta*) which is a conceit wherein, according to the *Aṅguttara*'s commentary, one asserts that one is inferior even to inferior persons.²

Self-contempt occurs in several stock listings of the varieties of conceit. A standard list of seven types of conceit, for example, describes ordinary conceit (*māna*), arrogance (*atimāna*), "arrogance upon conceit" (*mānātimāna*, when one considers oneself first equal but then superior to others), self-contempt (*omāna*), over-estimation (*adhimāna*), the "I am" conceit (*asmimāna*), and false pride (*micchāmāna*, taking pride in things that are wrong such as wrong livelihoods) (Vbh 346; Nd¹ 1.80, 1.208, 2.426; *Mohavicchedanī* 307). In another list given in the same passage, conceit and self-contempt are paired and contrasted, as when there is said to be eight conceits: conceit (*māna*) generated in gain and self-contempt (*omāna*) generated in loss, conceit in fame and self-contempt in lack of fame, conceit in praise and self-contempt in censure, and conceit in happiness and self-contempt in sorrow.

But why should self-loathing or feeling inferior be considered a type of pride or conceit, rather than, as western religious traditions have it, their opposite? In the Theravāda texts, the conceit of inferiority, like other forms of pride that arrogate oneself above others, is a subtle form of self-affirmation. Conceit, as it is generally understood, is waving one's flag or banner highest over others and drawing attention to oneself (DhsA 373; Nd¹ 1.80). Even if one is asserting one's inferiority, one is still engaged in a display of self-advertisement. At a more subtle level, both pride and self-contempt are wrong views of the self, an idea rendered explicit in the idea of the "I am" conceit. The "I am" conceit involves attributing reality to the five *khandhas*, falsely taking one's physical form or feelings, or any of the sets of impermanent factors, as oneself, and indeed as a point of pride. This craving to say "I am" and to attribute anything to the self, is a matter of not only conceit, but

¹ All abbreviations follow the conventions of the Pali Text Society. All translations of the Pāli sources are my own, using the edition of the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyāna CD-ROM (Vipassana Research Institute, Nashik, India).

² A.iii.430; AA.iii.412. See Cone 2001, p. 65; *atinipāta* is not listed in Stede and Rhys Davids' *Pāli-English Dictionary*.

craving and delusion.³ As such, it the most subtle and intransigent of the conceits, likened to the residual scent of soap on a freshly laundered cloth; while the coarser and more obvious conceits are washed clean, an underlying tendency to say or think “I am” still hangs on (S.iii.131).

In this context, self-contempt is technically not a form of hatred, *dosa*, but of egoism and delusion, a false understanding and promotion of the self; the *Vibhaṅga* says that all impulses to assert “I am” are a matter of craving, conceit, and wrong view (Vbh 393f). It is a failure of the right kind of self knowledge in that it denies the lack of an enduring, substantial self. Self-contempt then, like other conceits, entails a cognitive error. Like the English word “conceit” which carries the meaning of conception or forming a notion about something, the Pāli word *māna* evokes the sense of the forging of opinions or conceptions; such conceptions construct an illusory or exaggerated sense of the self. Conceit is fashioned, made, and produced by the mind resulting in a contrived and inflated self-conception. One is said to “work up” (*jappeti*) conceit, that is to say, to produce or make it.⁴ Conceits are constructed—a matter of the mind’s fancy—and they are said to “devise, waver, and proliferate” (VbhA 513), which describe the whims, exertions, and obsessions of the imagination. Like other forms of error, this failure of self-knowledge is inseparable from craving—“conceit and wrong view do not exist without craving” (VbhA 515).

But self-contempt is a curious form of egoism and self-construction, entailing as it does much deriding and disparagement of oneself. This conceit involves regarding oneself as the worst—base, low, and vile—in ways which are not just cognitive confusions but evoke strong feelings of self-disgust, suggesting that we do not want to see it only in cognitive or intellectualist terms; we must also attend to its affective content. The commentaries parse *omāna* quite finely, determining distinct shadings and qualities of the experience:

In the description of the conceit of inferiority, “one works up self-contempt” means that one produces the conceit of being lowly. Self-contempt is a base conceit of being lowly. The description of the mode is self-loathing, and the state is self-loathed. There is “disdain” on account of such things as one’s

³ The most subtle level of the “I am” conceit is when one is experiencing the *jhānas*; to retain a sense that “I am” experiencing or attaining, say, the first *jhāna*, is still to be in the grip of the “I am” conceit. Given the subtlety of this level of conceit, a frequent concern in the Suttas is how it is that advanced practitioners can know whether or not they have entirely eliminated it. Since conceit, by its very nature, involves self-deception, how can one really know whether or not one is still deceiving oneself? The problem is raised frequently when highly advanced practitioners approach the Buddha and ask: “But how, Sir, does one know, how does one see, so that in regard to this body with its consciousness and all external signs, that there is no I-making, mine-making, and latent tendencies to conceit?” (M.iii.18). In other words, how can I know what I am experiencing without thinking “I am”? The answer is that only when one stops identifying oneself with anything, even one’s own most basic experiences of the five *khandhas*, is one free of this underlying conceit. In other cases, the Buddha confirms that such underlying tendencies to attribute experiences to the self are uprooted when his disciples report that they were not aware of attaining the *jhānas* as they experienced them and did not have the thoughts, “I am attaining the *jhānas*” (S.iii.235-8).

⁴ While this meaning of *jappeti* is not in Rhys David’s and Stede’s *Pāli-English Dictionary*, the *Sammohavinodanī* defines it in this context as “making, producing” (VbhA 486).

birth, disgust with oneself. “Scorn” means excessive disdain. “Scorned” is the description of that state. Making oneself inferior, “self humiliation (*attuññā*)” is known. “Disrespect for the self” means blaming oneself. “Despising oneself according to such things as one’s birth” means the conceit of despising oneself [thinking] “not even my birth is fortunate” (VbhA 486).

Here one turns inward in blame and humiliation, not on the basis of wrong doing as might be indicated in shame or guilt,⁵ but rather on the basis of one’s social status or qualities. A further exegesis defines *omāna* this way:

Self-contempt is said to be the conceit called “I am inferior.” Furthermore, this self-contempt should be understood as occurring through making oneself lowly [by thinking to oneself]: “you have birth, but your birth is like a crow’s birth, you have a clan, but your clan is like a Caṇḍāla clan, you have a voice, but your voice is like that of a crow” (VbhA 488).

One “makes oneself lowly” by a process of self-chastisement, even self-mockery, by a deliberate lowering of oneself in one’s own estimation to construct or project a person who is base.

Only in one instance that I am aware of is the possibility considered that self-contempt may not really be a matter of conceit after all, and that is raised by an Abhidhamma subcommentary. The *Vibhaṅga-mūlaṭīkā* suggests that “because of it being only in name a conceit since it occurs through depression, the conceit of inferiority does not merit an exposition” (*Vibhaṅga-mūlaṭīkā*, Chap. 17, Sect. 868). The reference here to depression (*onati*) contrasts with the elevation or haughtiness (*unnati*) present in conceit, and suggests an important element of melancholy or dejection that is at the heart of it. This particular line of inquiry, however, is not developed in the other textual instances of it.

The Theravādins may have been alone in developing the notion of self-contempt as a type of conceit. The other mainstream schools did not appear to follow them in interpreting the conceit of inferiority as a matter of self-contempt and sought an alternative interpretation. Vasubandhu takes the conceit of inferiority (Skt. *ūnamāna*) to mean that one considers oneself only slightly inferior to those greatly superior to oneself. This is, he says, “indeed a locus of pride, since one esteems oneself relative to a group of excellent persons which one regards as superior, even though one is really vastly inferior to them.”⁶ In even comparing oneself to one’s far superiors and putting oneself in their class, one arrogates oneself. Upon reflecting on such estimable persons as H. H. the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, and Dorothy Day, my extravagant claim that I am only slightly inferior to them in selfless and virtuous leadership and service, would certainly register as such a conceit.

⁵ Shame and guilt are also important emotions of self-assessment, but they belong to a different psychological and moral system than these matters of conceit. See Heim (2009).

⁶ de la Vallée Poussin, 1989, Chap. V.10a-b. Pruden, pp. 785–786. Vasubandhu enumerates the same seven types of *māna*: *māna*, *adhimāna*, *mānātimāna*, *asmimāna*, *abhimāna*, *ūnamāna*, and *mithyāmāna*.

This interpretation neatly avoids some of the apparent oddities in the notion of the conceit of inferiority, but at the price of rather intriguing psychological complexities that emerge in the Theravādin interpretations. The Theravādin insistence on the real possibility of self-loathing, and the texts' rendering of it as a variety of conceit, allow us to investigate closely the psychology of pride and self-hatred in Buddhist thought, yielding a deeper understanding of the emotions involved in self-assessment. Moreover, the texts' theorization of these experiences also illuminates the socially-inflected dimensions of self-knowledge.

Conceit and Vanity

Before examining more closely the idea of self-contempt, some provisional surveying of the general landscape of pride is in order. Two terms—*māna* and *mada*—are particularly relevant for sketching out how the texts construe some of the possible ways one may relate to oneself. *Māna*, translated here as “conceit” may also be translated as “pride,” although “conceit” may, as I have already suggested, get at the root verbal meaning (*maññati*) shared with the English verb “conceive,” and it may be less freighted morally and religiously than the English word “pride.”⁷ It is defined as a kind of haughtiness, arrogance, and self-advertisement, which Buddhaghosa connects to a type of madness (Vism 469). It is an inherent tendency (*anusaya*) and a fetter (*samyojana*), making it one of the key obstacles to progress on the religious path. *Mada*, on the other hand, means intoxication or madness, a kind of drunkenness about one's fine qualities, which I render here as “vanity.” It may be considered a particular type of conceit, or a higher degree of it in the direction of excessive or even silly self-fancy, where the mind seems to be in retreat.⁸ Both involve disparaging others while taking satisfaction in attributes of the self, particularly in qualities which are valued socially. And both involve looking inward and addressing oneself on the basis of one's perceived merits.

While noting the considerable overlap between them, we may begin with how the texts catalog the vanities before moving on to describe the types of conceits. Traditionally, three points of vanity are described in the Suttas—the vanity of youth, health, and longevity—modeled perhaps on the Bodhisatta's own experience prior to his renunciation (A.i.146; D.iii.220). The Bodhisatta living in his palace was vain about his youth, health, and life before realizing that he too was subject to old age, disease, and death. And there are other vanities, such as the vanity of manhood

⁷ Nāṇamoli prefers “conceit” in some contexts and “pride” in others: “etymologically it is derived perhaps from *māneti* (to honour) or *mināti* (to measure). In sense, however, it tends to become associated with *maññati*, to conceive (false notions, see M.i.1), to imagine, to think (ase.g. at Nd.1.80, Vbh 390 and comy.). As one of the ‘defilements’ (see M.i.36) it is probably best rendered by ‘pride’. In the expression *asmi-māna* (often rendered by ‘the pride that says “I am”’) it more nearly approaches *maññanā* (false imagining, misconception, see M.iii.246) and is better rendered by ‘the conceit “I am”’, since the word ‘conceit’ straddles both the meanings of ‘pride’ (i.e. haughtiness) and ‘conception’ (Nāṇamoli 1991, p. 758, n.18).

⁸ Vasubandhu distinguishes between them: “*māna*, the error of pride, is arrogance. But *mada*, pride-intoxication, is the abolition of the mind of one who is enamored with his own qualities” (de la Vallée Poussin 1989, Chap. II, 33b, Pruden, p. 204).

(*purisamada*), wherein one is smug about being male (Vism 294; DhsA 403). But the most exhaustive analysis of the vanities is found in the *Vibhaṅga* and its commentary, the *Sammohavinodanī*.

The *Vibhaṅga*'s listing of vanities gives an extensive catalog of bases for self-satisfaction, ranging from social distinctions (caste, clan), registers of status for monks (having a large personal following, accumulating a hoard of personal wealth through gifts), and personal attainments (learning, deportment, success, fame, skill in crafts, moral behavior [*sīla*], and levels of meditative attainment [*jhāna*]).⁹ One might also be vain about various excellences of the body, intoxicated with one's youth, health, longevity, color or beauty (*vaṇṇam*), tallness, girth, shape, and even bodily perfection. Each vanity is illustrated through an inner voice of self-congratulation; for example, one vain about one's health thinks to oneself: "I am healthy. Others have much illness, but I am not sick for even as long as it takes to pull a cow's udder." About one's bodily perfection one declares, "on the bodies of others there are many faults, but on my body not even a tip of a hair can be faulted."

There is in addition a whole class of vanities concerning how one is regarded by others. One may be vain in veneration (*garukāramada*), as when one thinks "people go treading on the backs of other monks' feet and they do not revere them even while [knowing] that 'this one is a monk,' but on seeing me they pay homage; they think I am to be treated as weighty like a stone umbrella, and as hard to approach as a mass of fire." One may put on airs about the deference shown to one by other monks (*purekkhāramada*): "when a controversy arises, it is resolved only with my leadership. When they go on almsround, they do so with me only in front and surrounding me." And one may even be vain over the simple fact of not being despised (*anavaññātamada*): "the rest of beings are disdained, despised; but I am neither disdained nor despised."

These modes of self-address, of which only a sampling is given here, are quite colorful illustrations of these vanities, exemplifying them by the very nature of the thoughts one has to oneself. The vain, fanciful, and even humorous nature of each intoxication is made explicit when one compares oneself to a mass of fire, or fancies other monks getting their feet stepped on; one suspects the text is gently poking fun at the ways we talk to ourselves. The thoughts entail comparison with others to their detriment, and the constructing of a self that is known through trumpeting others' alleged shortcomings. The quality of self-address here cultivates a distinctive "voice to oneself" that takes the measure of others and assures oneself of one's superiority. The voice to oneself in the vanities is different from the self-accusations in the conceit of inferiority which turn against the self, most notably by addressing oneself in the second person—"your voice is like that of a crow." Here we have self-aggrandizement in the first person.

We can no doubt learn much more about Buddhist approaches to subjectivity by attending more closely to these modes of self-address, which, though quite pervasive in Buddhist literature, have not attracted much modern scholarly attention as distinctive forms of imaginative discourse. Buddhaghosa employs various voices to oneself in both first and second person to illustrate psychological ideas as well as for

⁹ See Vbh 345 and VbhA 466-8 for the vanities described in this and the following paragraph.

tools in meditation. One might also recall Śāntideva's famous self-recriminations and many registers of self-address in both first and second person (Śāntideva 1995). Such voices to oneself imagine and display the subtleties of (and possibilities for) subjective experience.

To turn briefly now to how the varieties of conceits are catalogued. Like the vanities, conceits are also often described as the way one defines oneself to oneself, and they too may be generated on the basis of birth (*jāti*), clan (*gotra*), good family, appearance, wealth, learning, crafts, knowledge, lore, and [skill in] recitation (Vbh. 346; VbhA. 486; Nd¹.1.80; 2.426). One can also take pride in youth, health, and long life (A.iii.71-72). Some of these are matters over which one has little control, such as one's birth, while others indicate skills and accomplishments. The texts are particularly exercised about monks taking unwarranted pride in their achievements, or thinking that they have achieved stages of meditative contemplation which they have not. This kind of conceit, overestimation, is a real danger even for those who are highly advanced in the practice, though it does not occur in Noble Disciples or those as advanced as Stream-winners (VbhA 488).

“Real Conceits” and the Ranking of Persons

While conceit may be described according to the basis or attribute in which it is taken, the commentaries argue that conceit can also be described “according to persons,” where persons are considered (*dahati*) or placed (*ṭhapeti*) according to their social ranking (VbhA 486). It is in this context, discussed in both the *Mahāniddeśa* and in the canonical and commentarial *Abhidhamma*, that some of the most fascinating aspects of self-contempt occur. These rankings suggest that constructions of oneself to oneself are constrained and shaped by how one assesses one's social standing.

There are three types of conceit—“I am superior,” “I am equal,” and “I am inferior,” and three types of persons ranked according to social status—superior, equal, and inferior (Vbh 346; VbhA 486-87; DhsA 373; Nd¹ 1.80; 2.426). Variations of these result in nine possible arrangements with each type of person potentially having all three types of conceit. For example, a superior person would be either a king or a monk. When a king declares himself better than other kings, asserting: “who is my equal with respect to kingdom, wealth, or forces?” he displays the conceit of superiority (*seyyomāna*). A monk might generate the conceit of superiority by declaring “who is my equal with respect to virtue or the ascetic practices?” Both might assert the conceit of equality (*sadisomāna*) by casting around to see if there is any difference between them and other kings or monks. And these superior persons might also experience the conceit of inferiority when they compare themselves to better kings and monks.

For one who is superior the conceit “I am inferior” arises in him also. The king who lacks success with kingdom, wealth, or forces, generates conceit [saying] “only the pleasure of the name of king is mine, what kind of king am I?” And the monk who has little gain or honor generates conceit saying

“[I am] only called a preacher of the Dhamma, a learned one, a great elder. What kind of preacher am I? What kind of learned one? What kind of great elder am I who have but little gain and honor?” (VbhA 487)

In all of these considerations the king and the monk judge or place themselves against others, and build up a sense of pride about themselves in comparison to others of their rank.

Similarly, a person who is of equal or middling status may also experience the three conceits. The *Sammohavinodanī* offers the example of the minister or courtier who compares himself to others of the king’s men. Depending upon how his own material wealth stacks up to that of other courtiers, he may generate the conceit of superiority, equality, and inferiority.

Finally, in the case of the inferior person the text considers how slaves might arrogate themselves in relation to other slaves.

For an inferior person the conceits starting with “I am superior” arise for slaves, etc. For a slave generates these conceits: “what other slave is my equal with reference to mother or father? For others become slaves because of their bellies not from birth. But I am superior having come from a lineage.” Or, “what difference is there between me and a certain slave who is a pure slave on both sides by coming from a lineage?” Or, “I have come to slavery because of my belly. On neither my mother’s nor my father’s side is there slavery. What kind of slave am I?” And just as for the slave who generates these conceits, so too for Pukkusas and Caṇḍālas, etc. (VbhA 487).

Here, claiming pure slave ancestry is deemed superior to being born higher but reduced by hunger to slavery, perhaps through a sort of debt bondage. This hierarchy of slave status registers an intriguing social distinction valued at least by this text: claiming a slave lineage is preferred to falling into bondage by misfortune.

Notice too that like the king, the monk, and the ministers, the slave compares himself only to those in his same social class and asserts his status relative to distinctions deemed important to that class. A slave may compare himself to other slaves, but never to a king. There is a marked conservatism here as the texts refuse to challenge or blur these basic social categories. They thus constrain the possibilities of the social imagination and do important cultural work: even in one’s thoughts to oneself one may not stray too far away from one’s actual social location.

The texts then go on to make an important general distinction about these conceits. In fact, they argue, only the conceit appropriate to the person’s actual social status is a “real conceit” (*yathāvamāna*) (VbhA 487; DhsA 373). Only for the superior person is the conceit of superiority real, and likewise, only for the equal person is the conceit of equality real and for the inferior person the conceit of inferiority. Here the authenticity of the conceits themselves is tied to some objective reality about one’s social location: a king cannot *really* experience the conceit of inferiority nor the slave *really* claim the conceit of superiority. This distinction between real and unreal conceits thus has the intriguing effect of

affirming the importance of the social distinctions one has internalized in the experience of conceit. One can only feel accurate self degradation when it is confirmed or echoed by one's social degradation. Moreover, unreal conceits (*ayāthāvamāna*) are easier to be rid of and are eliminated by the Stream-winner path, while only the Arhat path is able to eliminate real conceits (VbhA 352). Confusion about one's social status—thinking one could be inferior while a king—is an easier conceit to dislodge than a self-conception that has some basis in social fact. This suggests that conceits that correspond to a social convention entail a deeper level of self-deception and construction that is rooted out only by Arhats. It also suggests that our self-definitions are socially determined right up to the very pinnacle of the religious path.

The *Sammohavinodanī* offers further reflection on conceit more generally through its analysis of what the *Vibhaṅga* calls “thoughts based on craving” (Vbh 394-400; VbhA 513-516). Here the commentary probes the various factors that contribute to the thoughts “I am,” “I shall be,” “I might be,” and “would that I might be.” These four possibilities describe how I conceive of myself at present, how I might be in the future, how I might imagine myself either in doubt or speculation, and how I might plan to be. The text asks, on what do such self-construals depend? At bottom these thoughts are, of course, matters of deep craving, but the text analyzes them further as either internally generated (that is, not a matter of comparison but of naming one's attributes) or as matters of comparing oneself to others. Again, these thoughts often occur around one's social class, as one self-identifies, for example, as a Kṣatriya, a Brahman, or a householder, and then compares oneself to others of the same rank. Although neither the *Vibhaṅga* nor its commentary go as far as we might wish they would in theorizing the nature of these self-definitions (beyond working out how they are matters of conceit, craving, and wrong view), the texts' very effort to map them and name the ways they are contingent on internal obsessions and external factors, enumerates and describes the possibilities and limits of self-construal. Borrowing from certain feminist terminology, we might say that they depict the repertoire of imaginative activity one can fashion about oneself, and make evident that this repertoire is mediated by what we might refer to as “the dominant cultural imaginary.”¹⁰

The foregoing analyses of vanity and conceit thus affirm a substantial conventional element in these self-evaluations, both in their considerations of the types of things one might be conceited about, as well as the social hierarchy of persons and how it affects both the possibility and authenticity of what one can experience about oneself.¹¹

¹⁰ I rely here on language from feminist philosopher Catriona Mackenzie, who is also interested in how “the repertoire on which we draw in our imaginary self-representations is mediated by the available cultural repertoire of images and representations” (Mackenzie 2000, pp. 139, 143).

¹¹ It should be noted that, of course, other discourses have the Buddha rejecting such things as class and clan as appropriate standards of value. The story of the Brahman Ambaṭṭha, for example, describes the Buddha dismissing Ambaṭṭha's conceits about his Brahman class status and arguing instead that reputation should come from unexcelled knowledge and conduct, which are arrived at by abandoning all such conventional values (D.i.99-100).

Self-Contempt in Comparative Perspective

When we consider the shared condemnation of pride in many religious traditions, it is striking that there is little common ground on the valuation of—at least as western religious traditions have it—its opposite, humility. In Buddhist traditions there is no term that exactly corresponds to the range of ideas associated with the virtue of humility, which we may define, provisionally and following Norvin Richards, as “having a low opinion of oneself” (2001, p. 815). Although humility has a complicated history of its own and means different things in different contexts, ranging from self-contempt to much milder forms of self-awareness,¹² there is no comparable single term in the Theravāda literature. The closest term may be *nivāta*, instanced most readily in the Maṅgala Sutta, but not widely mentioned beyond that. *Nivāta* means lowliness or mildness, and is glossed by the commentary on the Maṅgala Sutta as “having pride (*māna*) and arrogance (*dappa*) put down, like a towel for wiping feet, like a bull with its horns cut off, like a snake defanged, one is mild, congenial, and speaks pleasantly” (SnA 268 on Sn 268). Yet *nivāta* is not widely attested in the Pāli sources.

Beyond this, several different and even unrelated concepts may get at aspects of the English word humility, but they are not stitched together to encompass a single virtue. While the Vinaya texts do not aim at something called humility as such, they are expounded in part “in order to teach people about their faults,” according to the *Atthasālinī* (DhsA 21), and certainly discipline and modest comportment are crucial objectives of many of the rules. But the Vinaya is not described as a monastic program in developing humility in the way that monastic regimes in certain Christian conceptions would have it.

We may perhaps look elsewhere to devotional contexts where acts of reverence (*pūjā*) or homage (*nama*) acknowledge a certain inferiority with respect to the esteemed superior, but this reverence does not explicitly point to humbleness as a moral virtue per se. Or, alternatively, it may be that humility should be interpreted as an essential part of worship, prostration, and demure bodily comportment but it is something known primarily in peoples’ bodies rather than theorized in texts.¹³ Finally, perhaps certain aspects of what is often prized in humility, such as meekness and the capacity to be easily corrected, may be picked up in the Pāli term *mudutā*, softness or pliancy, which is a highly valued quality in the texts.¹⁴ It does not, however, do all the things humility does.

In Christian and Jewish thought, by contrast, humility is sometimes elevated to the position of the highest of moral virtues, for without it, one has no appropriate

¹² See Andre (2002) for a very helpful treatment of the term. In her account, humility can range from self-loathing in certain Christian traditions, to a much milder form of self-knowledge.

¹³ Robert Fuller mentions, briefly and in a general way, the idea that “physical experiences such as kneeling, getting small, or putting one’s face on the ground help structure religious notions such as submission or humility” (2007, p. 22). He calls for more work on “how bodily movement guides the development of religious concepts,” though we might suggest that emotions and experiences might be known in bodily movement that do not in fact always get verbalized or conceptualized.

¹⁴ Softness of body and mind are among the *kusaladhammas* that contribute to moral thought and action; see Nyanaponika 1998, pp. 73–74 for a helpful exposition.

grasp of oneself in relation to God. For both of these traditions, humility's opposite, pride, is perhaps the most noxious threat to morality and is considered the first and gravest of the seven mortal sins in Christianity. In certain Christian traditions humility approaches the far reaches of self-contempt. In a learned and subtle reflection on the subject of humility, Bernard of Clairvaux considers humility to be the highest monastic virtue. He defines humility as "that thorough self-examination which makes a man contemptible in his own sight" (Burch 1940, p. 125). According to George Bosworth Burch, there are two kinds of humility for Bernard, cognitive humility and conative humility. Cognitive humility is to know oneself as one really is, made "in the image of God but separated from him by sin, ignorance, and wretchedness" (p. 50). This is a necessary or involuntary virtue engendered in us by the truth and for that reason has no merit associated with it. Conative humility is defined as voluntary, "desiring others to have similar contempt for you" (p. 51). The first humility is a cold and necessary truth about oneself; the second is "a humility which love produces and warms" (p. 51). That is, when you are truly capable of loving others you want them to know the truth about you, that you are contemptible in the eyes of God. Bernard's treatise is a monastic program in the steps of humility—how to develop this respect for the truth about yourself and the love to allow others to know it also. Moreover, this virtue has important moral value. A rightly ordered vision of ourselves in which we recognize our own weaknesses allows us to be sympathetic to others and to love them. Humility engenders mercy: "observe what you are, that you are wretched indeed, and so learn to be merciful, a thing you cannot know in any other way" (pp. 56, 155). Finally and in full circle, humility engenders a love for oneself, though not pride or vanity, but a love that is purified and rightly ordered, proportionate to the weakness of its object and "accompanied by fear and sadness rather than joy" (p. 69).

While of course the theological assumptions differ entirely, both the Theravāda and Bernard's writings betray a strong longing for the truth—the truth can shine in and inform us about our true nature and standing. In Bernard's thought, the truth will show us, coldly, our miserableness. For Buddhists, the truth of nonself (*anattā*) will dismantle any substantial, enduring self along with the ignorance, hatred, and delusion that results from clinging to such a notion. For both, such self-knowledge is elusive and requires a difficult program to acquire it. But the differences between them are more apparent than the similarities. For one thing, Bernard treats self-contempt at least in part as a matter of being right or accurate about oneself: one *is* wretched and lowly with respect to God's greatness. Part of its value is that humility is aligned with the truth about oneself. But for the Theravādins, knowing the truth of *anattā* does not entail that one is contemptible, but that such considerations cannot even apply. To still hold onto the idea of oneself as having the attribute of being contemptible or anything else is not to grasp the teaching of nonself.

But another aspect of the value Bernard attributes to humility is its moral potential. Having a low opinion of oneself makes it possible to love and have mercy for others. Robert Green's discussion of humility in Judaism also discerns its value in moral relations. He argues that in various discussions in the rabbinic sources "humility is frequently spoken of as the chief virtue" since it is the salt which lends "savor to all moral deeds and dispositions" (1973, p. 54). As with Bernard, humility

is valued and pride abhorred because in humility one recognizes one's proper relation of subordination to God. God's own humility models how humility expresses a special concern for the poor, and may in fact be seen to be a foundation for God's very attributes of justice and mercy. That is, because God is humble he is solicitous to the unfortunate which expresses both these divine attributes (pp. 56–57). And since God is the model for humans, his humility shows what is required for humans' moral development, in particular in developing a concern for the poor and disadvantaged.

Here too we are struck by the differences between rabbinic thinking and the Theravāda. Lacking a notion of humility that in any way resembles these Christian and Jewish conceptions is perhaps not surprising, given how closely the latter rest upon theological assumptions about God. Yet we may still note how foreign these conceptions' routing to mercy and compassion through humility is to the Theravādin thought considered here. In many of Buddhaghosa's programs for developing love and compassion, the path to loving others begins by love for oneself. In training oneself in loving-kindness, for example, Buddhaghosa insists that one starts by generating love towards oneself by wishing "may I be happy and free of suffering," and he cites canonical sources to the effect that "one loving oneself will not harm others" (*Vism* 297, citing *S.i.75*).

Modern assessments of humility indicate a strong ambivalence about its moral value. For some, humility is hard to reconcile with either the truth (why should those who are exceptional not be honest with themselves about it?), or with the self esteem deemed by many modern thinkers as integral to moral development. David Hume, whose thoughts on pride and humility challenged many earlier religious conceptions of these attitudes, does not require that people be fully sincere in their humility, for in fact, he argues, "a genuine and hearty pride, or self esteem, if well conceal'd and well founded, is essential to the character of the man of honour" (1975, p. 598). But more recently several accounts of humility attempt to revive it as a virtue. Norvin Richards defines it as "a matter of having oneself in proper perspective"; we should be wise to true nature of our actual selves, and this view is only depressing if one accepts the Christian conception of the nature of human beings (2001, p. 815). Judith Andre goes further than Richards, interpreting it not only as "a commitment to accurate self-assessment," but also as having a valuable emotional dimension (2002, p. 278). She fashions humility into a quite compelling moral ideal by suggesting that it involves not only the clarity and skill to acquire self-knowledge, but that it also entails compassion towards oneself, the ability "to be at ease with one's mistakes and flaws" (p. 280).¹⁵ This not only allows for developing compassion for others, but it also, in a fundamental sense, involves working out a proper moral relationship to oneself.

These constructions may rehabilitate humility for modern tastes, but they do so only by distancing it from the self-contempt essential to the ideal in its medieval religious heritage and the self-loathing which is the key issue in the Buddhist sources we are concerned with. A much closer modern analogue to the Buddhist

¹⁵ Notice how different this is from Bernard's conception of humility which is an experience of fear and profound unease.

treatment of self-contempt can be found in the psychoanalytic literature, which, like the Theravādin texts, suggests that self-loathing and pride are part of the same system. Karen Horney argues that “pride and self-hate are actually one entity” (1950, p. 110). Vicious self-accusations “stem from neurotic pride and express the discontent of the proud self with the individual’s not measuring up to its requirements” (p. 131). Pride builds up an idealized self and then castigates the actual self for falling far short of it. Moreover, self-contempt is not a matter of true knowledge of the self, but rather an alienation from it.

The parallel with the psychoanalytic formulation perhaps can not go much further, given that in the end, the psychoanalytic conception of the self is far too robust for Buddhist ideas about the self or lack of it. Yet the shared inclination to align pride and self-loathing may illuminate certain insights about self-knowledge. Both pride and harboring a low opinion of oneself entail inflated and emotionally charged conceptions. Neither delivers any particular moral value. In the Buddhist texts, based as they are on a fundamental error—that there is a self to which one can attribute such conceptions—neither pride nor self-contempt can offer resources for moral agency. We do not find overweening displays of meekness and self-abasement valorized in these sources. At the same time, we do not find any clear analogue to the modern idea of self-esteem on which much effective social functioning and moral action are thought to rest.

Conclusions

What has been most striking about this investigation into self-loathing is the way the texts recognize—and yet in some sense do not question—the deeply entrenched nature of social distinctions in our self-awareness and emotional life. Indeed social class is embedded in the very conceptions one is able to construct about oneself, and the last vestiges of conceit about oneself and one’s social rank are abandoned finally only by arhats. In this view, who we are and who we consider ourselves to be both cognitively and affectively, are deeply and inextricably tied to how we are known socially. As certain feminist philosophers have also been exploring, our subjectivity is socially conditioned, perhaps all the way through.

But the Theravādin conception presses further. Self-loathing, while it involves a rather perverse form of self-construction, is like other voices to oneself, based ultimately in conceit and manufactured by desire; there is a subtle desire and agency at work in even our negative self-formulations. The Buddhist texts considered here do not train their gaze on the *social* dimensions of our social conditioning, but rather look inward to the innermost psychological mechanisms that construct our sense of ourselves, finding that at bottom our self-assessments are fueled by desire. The perversities of these desires to abase oneself in one’s own eyes demonstrate not only humans’ pernicious entanglements in self-affirmation, but also a psychological complexity that seems to counter many of our ideas about what we might think humans want for themselves. The initial intuitions of His Holiness the Dalai Lama that humans, desiring the good for themselves, cannot in fact despise themselves, are challenged by this psychology. Scrutinizing our various “voices to ourselves”

we find a quite subtle form of desire that expresses itself through a distinctive quality of hostility and pain that turns its target inward. The answers, according to these sources, are found not in scrutinizing social mores, but in learning to recognize and dismantle the ways we talk to ourselves and tell ourselves who we are.

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