

# FROM HUMILITY TO HUBRIS AMONG SCHOLARS AND POLITICIANS

Exploring Expressions of  
Self-Esteem and Achievement

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Exploring Expressions of  
Self-Esteem and Achievement

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## PREFACE

If you told me that I was going to end this book with a warning about the effects of illiberal political manipulation, gullible populations fed up with their government and its politicians, and extremely self-centered, overconfident aspirants for political office, I would have said that you are wrong. This was to be a monograph exploring self-esteem and its roots in personal achievement, nothing more, nothing less. Its conceptual foundation was to be a scale of growing intensity of positive self-evaluation running from modesty to pride to conceit flanked by humility on the left — self-debasing modesty — to hubris on the right — self-promoting superiority forged on past achievement. Politicians and academics would make for a nice comparison, since both types advance in their pursuits by factual analysis and reasoned argument, as applied to practical political problems or as applied to intellectual (i.e., scientific and humanistic) puzzles. In fact, this book did get written as intended, though with a major twist.

Of course, the foregoing statement about the similarity of these two is phrased in ideal terms. In reality, politics and scholarship have never been nearly so cleanly separated. Bertrand Russell explains why: “The opinions that are held with passion are always those for which no good ground exists; indeed the passion is the measure of the holders lack of rational conviction. Opinions in politics and religion are almost always held passionately.” By contrast, the scholarly activities, at their greatest effectiveness, cannot be conducted

in this way, since they are essentially dispassionate pursuits of knowledge. So I knew from the outset that scholarship and politics were not always the same, but nonetheless, I thought they would be enough alike to engender some enlightening comparisons. Yet, not until I started writing, early in 2016, did I begin to see more crisply the extent of their divergence.

Beginning early that year I became ever more familiar with the political mess that the Western democracies were sliding into. More particularly, the social context framing the expression of self-esteem and achievement — of humility—modesty—pride—conceit—hubris — was gradually losing its moorings. In the later years, leading up to early 2016, national populist movements began to form around diverse grievances about unwanted immigrants, rising levels of unemployment, widening gaps between rich and poor, sharpening of values distinguishing city and country, increasing threats of terrorist activity, among others. Much of this had already been happening in Europe when Donald Trump's rise to popularity in the United States in early 2016 proved that such populism was also alive there. What these movements needed to succeed at the ballot box was an attractive leader, one with charisma, antipathy toward the political establishment, and a heavy dose of persuasive hubris.

The contextual part of this study of achievement and self-esteem is framed in discussions of individualism and individuality, big-picture/little-picture thinking, and tolerance and compromise. Conceit and hubris have come to dominate the conversation in contemporary life, and so it is with this book. Humility, modesty, and pride are there in that life (presumably), but they are not seen as interesting news and so fail to appear in the press. Moreover, the analysis that I thought I was embarking had to be rejigged to fit the political and characterological realities of 2016–2017. What started out as an exploration in symbolic interactionist social psychology

has wound up also being interpreted on the three analytic contextual levels of micro, meso, and macro sociology and history.

Scientifically, such rejigging is a good thing. This book will show how understanding political and intellectual self-esteem is enriched when viewed in this contextual framework. Analyses of this breadth are rare in the humanities and the social sciences, specialized as they tend to be these days.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Given that hubris is a hot subject in today's politics, it was critical that this book be published as soon as possible. Fortunately, Alison Lumb (production editor) and Lakshmi Manimaran (copy editor) shared this sense of urgency, but however, avoided turning the project into a "rush job." Rather, the result was a fine execution of their responsibilities. Many thanks to both of you.

## INTRODUCTION

*Luxury is the wolf at the door and its fangs are the vanities and conceits germinated by success. When an artist learns this, he knows where the danger is.*

— Tennessee (Thomas Lanier) Williams

A main theme running through this book is that we cannot understand the virtues of humility and modesty without an equally good understanding of the vices of hubris and conceit. All four are modes of expression that communicate self-esteem as it springs from one or more achievements. Achievement is valued in any challenging field, be it for example, art, science, sport, entertainment, business, politics, religion, or administration. Moreover, it is for this reason alone that achievers are inclined to discuss their excellence or may be forced to discuss that excellence when others inquire about it or remark on it. By these routes, achievement and self-esteem surface frequently in the diverse academic and political exchanges that encourage humility/modesty or hubris/conceit.

Achievement in a respectable activity can be a wonderful personal milestone accompanied by positive emotions, where in the modern world individualism and its progeny individuation are widely valued. It may also be wonderful for other people in the achiever's family, social circles, community, or society when they are favorably affected. To be objective, not everyone respects someone else's achievement judged as meritorious by a select group. Thus, there is honor but only among thieves when they revere one of their member who is extraordinarily talented at picking pockets, defrauding the elderly, or cracking safes.

The upshot of all this is that most people these days have something to say, directly or indirectly, about their achievements as these are valued by one or more reference groups. How they say this, how they express their self-esteem in this regard, depends on among other factors whom they are interacting with (e.g., a peer, boss, parent, spouse, leader in the field), how outstanding the achievement (e.g., only university degree in the family's history, first prize in a major art festival, scoring record in an international sport), and how secure they are in their knowledge that those who count most know about the achievement and value it appropriately.

Achievement meritorious enough to generate discussion in either private or public circles covers a vast territory. This book will concentrate on only two areas of it, namely, those occupied by scholars and by politicians. In their world, self-esteem flowing from achievement is founded on expertise related to ideas, their generation, and their implementation. Here logic reigns supreme, or at least, is *supposed* to, and it is the expression of this expertise that leads us to the heart of this book: how is such expertise presented in scholarly and political discourse and how does this presentation facilitate or constrain that discourse and, over the long term, does it advance knowledge and understanding (scholars), governance,

and community leadership (politicians)? Achievement leading to conceit/hubris in fields like sport and high-level business management (i.e., the CEOs and MDs) revolves much less around ideas than around athletic prowess and business and organizational experience, respectively. Given the gold mine of highly exuberant self-esteem in these two areas of life, they could easily be the subject of another book.

At the hubris/conceit end of the continuum of the expression of self-esteem, discussion risks are becoming uncivil, owing to the disagreeable ways that achievement is conveyed (e.g., boasting, depreciating others' related achievements). It follows that the discussion may also turn out to be substantially unproductive, for it seems so often to lead to excessive self-confidence, to hubris, or, as Leo Tolstoy once put it: "conceit is incompatible with understanding."

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Turning first to the scholars, or academics, they are experts in a social or physical science or a field in the humanities (e.g., languages, philosophy, and religion). Applied scientists and teachers are part of this group. One might be inclined to think of these people as being exclusively professional — they make all or a substantial part of their livelihood as scholars — but in fact many of them are amateurs. That is, many sciences have amateur wings, and a case has been made for the proposition that preprofessional students are amateurs (Stebbins, 2004/2014). The politicians under the microscope here are those in or aspiring to hold office in a municipal, state/provincial, or national government. In a democracy this office is elected, whereas it is acquired (sometimes violently) in totalitarian societies. Officials in both are capable of conceited/hubristic behavior.