

# Pride and the Logic of Self-Sufficiency

## I. INTRODUCTION

Edith Wharton concludes her novel, *Ethan Frome*, with an unhappy picture of Ethan that is evocatively captured in the following observation from his neighbor, Mrs. Hale, to a recent visitor: "I don't believe but what you're the only stranger has set foot in that house

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When we think of a proud person refusing help we often imagine someone like Ethan Frome, who is struggling and in need of assistance; or someone who is *not* like the narrator of the Temptations song, "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" ("I'm not ashamed to come and plead to you baby. / If pleading keeps you from walking out that door."); or a lost traveler who is too proud to ask for directions. These examples of the proud in need absorb our attention because they are so vivid and dramatic; they are the cases in which a proud person is most likely to be torn over whether to accept assistance and it seems (to many

theses about the self-sufficiency of the good person.<sup>5</sup> A proud person construes the proffered help of another as something to be resisted because it poses a threat to his worth. It is worthwhile pausing to consider why the proud hold this stoic attitude towards help. I will argue that this attitude can be traced to the conviction that personal excellence consists in meeting one's personal ideals. This conviction might appear ethically innocuous, or even praiseworthy, but it has dramatic implications.

I begin with a reminder in the form of a tautology. For a person to whom it is important that they meet their ideals, it is crucial that *they* meet their ideals. Ajax would much rather that *he* meet his heroic ideal of defeating his enemies on the battlefield than that another should defeat them. In this formal sense he is egoistic: he is driven by the desire that *he* do good more than by the desire that there be good. This egoism need not be substantively, or crudely, self-centered. Formally egoistic desires of the sort that I shall consider can have the good of others as their object, e.g., as when I desire that I help someone in need; and formally non-egoistic desires might have the good of myself as their object, e.g., as when I desire that the United States prosper economically. I suggest that the proud are most of all characterized by their disposition to care about one species of

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<sup>5</sup> I use 'Stoic' in the widest sense, meant to include Plato and Aristotle in addition to Seneca and other paradigmatic Stoics. For example, in *Republic*, Socrates claims that "a good person is most self-sufficient when it comes to living well, and is distinguished from other people by having the least need of anyone or anything else" (*Rep.* III 388, tr. Reeve).<sup>5</sup> In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle descr

formally

doing so), and that without her help he could butcher one warrior. If Ajax's concern is to bring about the most good then he should allow Athena to help (making the dubious assumption that his cause is just and that killing Trojans is good). But if his concern is to meet his ideals, which it is, then he should refuse Athena's help, which he does.<sup>8</sup>

The Ajax story simply brings to light the

The fact that the proud care about their ideal-desires does not by itself entail what we are trying to explain, namely that they desire self-sufficiency to the extent that they do. That entailment requires a separate thesis about the nature of personal worth specifying that the degree to which one meets one's ideals is inversely proportional to the degree to which one depends upon the assistance of others. In other words, the view that the more others help you to win, the less you win. The more that the gods help Ajax to kill his enemies, the less that Ajax meets his heroic ideals. Call this the 'dilution



This brings us back to the point of entry into the discussion, which is the case of Ethan refusing the aid of others when he is in need. I began with the suggestion that Ethan's refusal is motivated partly by his shame at having failed to meet his ide

### III. CONCLUSION

If my account of excessive pride is correct, then the overriding concern for meeting one's personal ideals cannot be morally appropriate because it involves a radically distorted view of ethical life. The excessively proud person suffers from moral jealousy insofar as he refuses to do what is right unless it is to his moral credit. But he is also, more fundamentally, indifferent to collective ideals. Although I cannot establish this claim here, there appears, at least, to be an incoherency in the commitment to individualistic ideals of excellence alone. For the very content of such ideals is typically derived from some collective good. Courage, for example, derives much of its point as an individualistic ideal from the important role it plays in the maintenance of society. If this is right, and if the proud lack collective ideals, then the proud are doomed to failure in their own eyes.