

Evagrius on Vainglory

Definition of Vainglory

“Vainglory involves fantasizing about social encounters, a pretence of industriousness, the contrary of truth, author of heresies, desire for privilege, the ultimate title, slavery to praises, a spirit with many forms, a beast with many teeth; the mean of vainglory is entwined with pride and jealousy, which are found within one another and which make war through one another, the three-strand chain of vices, the threefold poisonous mixture of passions, the threefold tongue of heretics.

Vainglory is associated with the pleasure of thinking about being honored by others. One therefore ought not to dwell on such thoughts or return to them for the pleasure they bring (*Eul.* 21.22). Instead love should lead one to keep secret the good that one does: “Love possesses nothing of its own apart from God, for God is love itself” (*Eul.* 21.23). Love also produces humility.

Thoughts that use pictures of human beings include pride, vainglory and sadness and these are predominantly rooted in thoughts about oneself (cf. *Refl.* 40).

Thoughts of vainglory are identified by many things that are pictured and wanted (cf. *Refl.* 44). Can one ever have too much? too much honor/esteem given by others?

Thoughts stemming from vainglory are inclined to see God as unjust (cf. *Refl.* 49). (He has not acted toward us according to what we need/deserve.)

Vainglory is Preceded By Pride

“A flash of lightning foretells the sound of thunder; vainglory announces the presence of pride.” (*8Th.* 8.2)

Signs of Vainglory

Making publicly visible what one has is a sign of vainglory:

“...[D]o not desire to possess riches in order to make donations to the poor, for this is a deception of the evil one that often leads to vainglory and casts the mind into occasions for idle preoccupations. You have in the Gospel the widow mentioned by the Lord Jesus with two small coins she surpassed the intention and the value afforded by the rich.” (*Fnd.* 4)

“Do not dress yourself in the finest clothes lest you quite blatantly put on the demon of vainglory, for the virtues are not born in the beauty of one’s clothes, but in the beauty of the soul...” (*Eul.* 23.24)

“Vainglory advises you to pray in the streets, but he who wars against it prays in his chamber” (*8Th.* 7.12; compare *Th.* 3)

Relating what one has done to gain the good opinion of others (esteem) is vainglory. Instead of doing religious works for God, one is now doing them for oneself and hoping to receive an immediate earthly

reward from others. In time this leads to talking about things one has or works one has done which do not actually exist. Vainglory encourages exaggeration and untruth. (*Eul.* 14.14)

“The thought of vainglory is a most subtle one and readily insinuates itself within the virtuous person with the intention of publishing his struggles and hunting after the esteem that comes from people. It invents demons crying out, women being healed and a crowd touching his garments; it even predicts to him that he will eventually attain the priesthood; it has people come to seek him at his door, and if he should be unwilling he will be taken away in bonds.” (*Pr.* 13; compare the “mental representations of holy charisms” which accompany vainglory in *Th.* 17.)

“The demon [of vainglory] introduces a crowd of people who glorify the Lord for these arrangements and certain people who gradually speak among themselves about the priesthood; he then predicts the death of the incumbent priest and adds that he should not flee after accomplishing so many things. In this way, the wretched mind, now bound by these thoughts, attacks those people opposed (to his priesthood), but those offering acceptance he readily lavishes them with gifts and approves their good sense; but those who are rivals he hands over to the magistrates and demands that they be expelled from the city.” (*Th.* 21)

Thoughts of vainglory, when dreaming, lead one to “see oneself rebuking demons, healing certain bodily conditions, or wearing the clothing of a shepherd and pasturing a little flock. And immediately upon waking one gets a fantasy of the priesthood and then spends the entire day thinking through the things that that involves; or as if the charism of healings were about to be granted, one sees in advance the miracles that happen and fantasizes about the people who will be healed, the honors coming from the brothers, and the gifts brought by outsiders, all those that come from Egypt and also from abroad, drawn by our renown.” (*Th.* 28)

Ingratitude (claiming all that was done by oneself and by one’s own power) is a sign of vainglory.

Achieving things through what one does can lead to either

- (1) to gratitude for the help one has received or
- (2) to presumption and vainglory.

“In afflictions be especially thankful, because through them you will perceive more clearly the grace of assistance; for by thus shaking off with thanksgiving the afflictions that come upon you, you will not darken the most radiant beauty of perseverance...But if the demon of acedia relents before the perseverance of your ascetic labors, then in turn the wild beast of presumption bites into your achievement. If therefore, apprehensive for your safety, you drive this away, you will drive away also the spirit of vainglory along with it” (*Eul.* 8.8).

Effects of Vainglory

If one succeeds in gaining esteem, this will feed pride (*Mn.* 61; cf. *Th.* 21). If one fails to gain esteem, it will create (untimely) sadness. (*Mn.* 61)

In either case, dwelling on vainglorious thoughts turns the mind from God to fixate on other things, leading the soul to become insensible: “the soul figures that sin is not really sin and thinks transgression is not transgressions...The soul does confess God, so to speak, but does not know what he has commanded; you beat your breast when it (the soul) is moved to sin and it shows no awareness of it; you argue from the scriptures, but it remains completely callous and does not listen; you expose to it is disgrace before people and it takes no account of the shame it causes among the brothers; this soul shows no understanding at all, like a pig that closes its eyes and breaks through its pen. Prolonged dwelling on thoughts of vainglory brings on this demon” (*Th.* 11).

Being praised for what one has done invites the jealousy of others, who will speak harsh words out of their own wounded vainglory (*Eul.* 17.18); one should not speak such words back to them, but see the words as if the words came directly from Satan and not from them.

“The foolish man makes a public show of his wealth and motivates many to plot against him. Hide what is yours, for you are on a road full of thieves, until they reach the city of peace and can safely make use of what is yours.” (*8Th.* 7.13)

Vainglory prepares the soul to take pride in its achievements and easily feel slighted/ disrespected by the comments/responses of others. This leads one to reject the spiritual authority or counsel of others and to feel fear or hatred/opposition toward the person who offers spiritual counsel (*Eul.* 26.27-28) In the *Eulogios* this ill will/hatred toward the other takes the form of jealousy (*Eul.* 3.3), a wrong use of irascibility (*Eul.* 11.10) that seizes upon perceived faults in the other and produces abusive language and malicious gossip (*Eul.* 16.17; 17.18)

It is thus not surprising that vainglory can lead to jealousy or envy not only in others but also in oneself. (Note that *Vices* 7-9 makes jealousy a ninth evil reasoning which follows from pride and vainglory and is closely associated with them.)

Vainglory overthrows and eradicates the power of the virtues and ruins/wipes out the value of what is done; prayers motivated by vainglory are sinful and will not be answered by God (*8Th.* 7.8). See also *8Th.* 7.6; 7.16).

Thoughts that suggest that the Lord’s commandments, “when they are done it be for the purpose of being seen by people...corrupt our intention or the way in which the commandment must be fulfilled. When it is necessary that the person who does the commandment does it for the Lord and does the work joyfully, for it is said: ‘Let he who does acts of mercy do them in joy. For what benefit is there if I divest myself of the thought of greed through doing good and the thought of gluttony through abstinence, but put on other thoughts of vainglory or grumblings? At the time of prayer I will certain

experience under their influence whatever happened to me in those first thoughts, namely, being deprived of the light that surrounds the mind during the time of prayer. "(Th. 30)

"When this thought has thus raised him aloft on empty hopes, it flies off abandoning him to be tempted either by the demon of pride or by that of sadness, who brings upon him further thoughts opposed to his hopes. Sometimes it delivers him over to the demon of fornication, he who a little earlier was a holy priest carried off in bonds." (Pr. 13)

Vainglory as the Last Temptation of the Spiritual Person

"Alone among the thoughts, the thoughts of vainglory and pride arise after the defeat of the remaining thoughts." (Refl. 57)

"It is hard to escape the thought of vainglory, for what you do to rid yourself of it becomes for you a new source of vainglory...[when other thoughts are conquered, vainglory] comes forward and displays for the monk the grandeur of his virtues..." (Pr. 30-31; see the extended treatment of demonically inspired conceit in *Eul.* 31.33)

"When the mind finally achieves the practice of pure prayer free from the passion, then the demons no longer attack it on the left, but on the right. They suggest to it a notion of God along with some form associated with the senses so that it thinks that it has perfectly attained the goal of prayer. A man experience in the gnostic life said that this happens under the influence of the passion of vainglory and that of the demon who touches a place in the brain and causes palpitation in the blood vessels.

"I think that the demon, by touching the spot just mentioned, alters the light around the mind as he wishes, and in this way the passion of vainglory is moved towards a thought that forms the mind heedlessly towards localizing the divine and essential knowledge, Since the mind is not troubled by the impure passions of the flesh but apparently has a pure disposition, it thinks that there is no longer any contrary activity within it, and so it supposes to be divine the manifestation that arises within it under the influence of the demon..." (Pr. 72-73)

"Vainglory is the origin of the mind's erring; when the mind is moved thereby, it makes attempts at circumscribing the divine in forms and figures." (Pr. 116)

See also the important general summary in *Eul.* 31.34; this also shows the effect on the person's mental health.

Cure for Vainglory

Freedom from vainglory comes from true self-knowledge (Pr. 32) (=humility), which is learned by keeping hidden one's actions/strengths (which are done for God alone) and by accepting dishonor and

sadness as containing a reminder of one's actual limitations (*8Th.* 8.30-31) and the need for honor to be directed instead toward God, who actually deserves it:

"...[V]ainglory is clever at shrouding and obscuring the virtues and is ever seeking after people's esteem and chasing away faith. For scripture says, 'How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God.' The good must be chosen, not for something else, but rather for itself. For if that is not granted, what moves us to do the good will appear of far greater than the good that is realized. This absurdity would mean conceiving of and speaking of something as superior to God." (*Pr.* prol. 3)

Freedom from vainglory is the working of humility, a defection from obsequiousness, blindness to praises, contemplation of knowledge, a counter to the world, keen perception of the soul, a teaching of lowliness, a hiding place for ascetic works, hostility to fame, a hidden treasure in a corruptible body." (*Vices* 7).

Emergency measure if one is about to assent to vainglory

Switch one's focus to some desirable object outside oneself which affects one (*Pr.* 58). The attention can only be focused on one thing at a time and redirecting the attention to an object of a fundamentally different type (not to oneself, but outside oneself; not honor but desire), will create room to prevent one from falling. (Of course, it would be better to a clear mind through impassibility, but shifting attention and desire to another object at least diverts/breaks the steamroller progress of desire toward unreasoned assent.)