Thinking faith
THE ONLINE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH JESUITS

The Seven Deadly Sins on Film:

Pride

Anna Abram

In week 2 of our Lenten series exploring the seven deadly sins, Anna Abram turns her attention to Anthony Minghella's 1999 film, The Talented Mr Ripley. Matt Damon plays Tom Ripley, a young musician who takes advantage of a misunderstanding to further his ambitions. How does his character show us that pride can be, quite literally, deadly?

The Talented Mr Ripley (Miramax International, 1999)

Pride, as we understand it, is not always bad. Feeling proud of the achievements of others is an act of generosity. 'I am proud of you' is a phrase that a child might hear from a parent after receiving a good grade in an exam or after comforting her distressed sibling; psychologists tell us that a child who has not received praise for good behaviour is prone to develop narcissism later in life. There are pedagogical functions of pride which aim to recognise achievement, commend good behaviour and foster the right development of a person. There are also social functions of pride: a country might be proud of its Olympic gold medalists, military heroes and even bankers who refuse to accept disproportionate financial bonuses. 'Pride Parades' in many Western cities can be viewed as celebrations of society's victory over homophobia. We can be proud of being British, American or Polish, Catholic, Lutheran or Hindu. Such statements express our contentment in identification with a particular nation or religion. There are positive sides to such identifications (fostering community spirit, loyalty and solidarity), but there are also dangers, especially when pride translates into a sense of superiority, which may lead to treating outsiders as inferior and causes alienation of the other.

It is not easy to question pride, especially in a culture which emphasises the importance of success and in which 'humiliation' rather than 'humility' is a more familiar concept. We are encouraged to 'sell' ourselves, be confident and hide our weaknesses. There are agencies that can help us improve our image, market our accomplishments and coach us into developing pride in ourselves. Building one's self-esteem and celebrating one's achievements are clearly good things which can not only contribute to forming a less anxious and more secure sense of self, but also aid our self-realisation. But this process brings with it the danger of over-selling ourselves and over-estimating our merits. How does one make an accurate self-assessment, in which achievements and failures, strengths and weaknesses are recognised? We need humility so that pride doesn't get out of hand.

Over-selling ourselves is one thing, but what is it about pride that makes it a deadly sin? Anthony's Minghella's psychological thriller, *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999) provides us with some answers. Tom Ripley (Matt Damon) is a young man of many talents and with grand dreams, but struggling to make a living in New York. In addition to his day job as a bathroom attendant in a prestigious music hall, he plays the piano. One evening, while playing at a party, Tom is approached by the wealthy shipbuilder, Herbert Greenleaf, who mistakenly believes Tom to be a student of Princeton University and a friend of his son, Dickie. Rather than correct Mr Greenleaf's mistake, Tom exploits it cleverly. When Greenleaf proposes that Tom travel to Italy to persuade Dickie

to return home, Tom accepts the proposal and a thousand dollars' payment. He sees this as an opportunity to acquire the status that he craves and live the highlife. In Italy he contrives a meeting with Dickie (Jude Law) and quickly integrates himself into Dickie's flamboyant life.

During this Italian adventure, Tom's inflated self-confidence, fantasy-driven ambition and obsessive desire for recognition cause his moral deterioration. We see his many 'talents' emerge: he impersonates flawlessly Herbert, Dickie's girlfriend and Dickie himself; he forges signatures perfectly; he is a charming show off and a masterful liar. Initially he behaves in this way so that he can maintain the lifestyle that his association with Dickie has afforded him, but later on he does so in order to cover up his crimes, all in the name of following his greatest desire: to be 'somebody'.

The plot becomes sinister after a local girl, whom Dickie got pregnant and refused to help, drowns herself. The usually-arrogant Dickie reacts to the situation with anger, but also with a sense of guilt about his playboy lifestyle and a desire for change. One of the changes he wants to make is to end his friendship with Tom. Dickie is tired of his new friend's lies about Princeton, his constant presence and growing dependence. Tom, however, is getting caught up in rather complicated sexual feelings for Dickie. His obsession with Dickie as a person is magnified by his fear of losing all that that person represents, and it is in the context of this increasing turmoil that Tom's pride really does become deadly. When Dickie agrees to take him on a final holiday to San Remo, the two of them take a boat trip and Tom confronts Dickie who, in return, tells Tom what he really thinks of him. Tom can't bear to hear the truth and reacts violently, killing Dickie.

Tom's reaction is evidence of his moral corruption: he has no remorse, he conceals his crime meticulously and fabricates stories so that those who were close to Dickie believe that he is still alive. He adopts his victim's persona by pretending to the rest of the world that he *is* Dickie. As observers, we find it almost impossible to be positive about his character, yet those around him have no idea how corrupt Tom is.

One of Tom's own remarks gives us an insight into how his pride serves to blind him to the truth about his behaviour: 'whatever you do, however terrible, however hurtful, it all makes sense ... in your head. You never meet anybody that thinks they're a bad person'. Pride wears masks and it is not always displayed in blunt arrogance and superior attitudes. In the opening credits, a series of adjectives – 'lonely', 'passionate', 'secretive', 'confused', 'mysterious', 'musical', 'haunted', 'loving', 'intelligent' – flicker momentarily onto the screen before being replaced finally by the word 'talented' in the title. All of these traits, in Tom's case, serve his pride. Women fall in love with him, strangers appreciate his charm and officials believe him, but in fact Tom has no close relationships. Occasionally we see him longing for closeness but we also notice his fear of it. What is he afraid of? His deepest fears seem to be disclosure and confrontation of himself. He has several opportunities to come clean, to tell the truth about – and to - himself, but each time he escapes by killing whoever it is that confronts him.

The closest that Tom comes to a change of heart is in the final scene: he is on a boat with Peter (Jack Davenport), his new lover. However, there is another passenger on the boat, a woman who was in love with him, who knows him as Dickie. Tom realises that he will soon be revealed to be an imposter. He feels trapped and starts explaining his fears to Peter. This time there is less fabrication and he begins to hint at the truth: 'if I could just go back ..., if I could rub everything out ... starting with myself'. However, he decides to keep his secret: 'I'm going to be stuck in the basement' by which he means his dark and frightening past. He does admit that he lied about who he was: 'I always thought it'd be better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody'; but when Peter attempts to reassure him – 'you are not a nobody; that's the last thing you are' – and lists the good traits that he sees in him, Tom cannot cope with what he hears. And, as he had done with Dickie on another boat, once again he chooses to avoid the confrontation with Peter, and with himself. The film concludes with Tom sobbing as he strangles Peter in his bed before going back to his cabin, alone.

The deadliness of pride arises from feelings of superiority, an inflated ego, which at times can be expressed in arrogance, at other times in false humility – whatever works best for the promotion of one's self-image. It feeds on ingratitude for what one has and is expressed in an instrumental treatment of others. Tom's pride is all the more complex and its effects more devastating as it is caught up with his envy of Dickie.

Psychologists would probably find it easier to talk about narcissism in Tom's case: a condition rooted in childhood as a result of parental abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Tom must have had unmet emotional needs and longings for affirmation which created an abyss in his soul ('narcissistic woundedness'). As a result, Tom's self-image was an illusion and he wanted to present this illusory version of himself to the world. This led him to annihilation, both his killing of others and destruction of his moral self. The Bible speaks of pride as leading to destruction and disgrace: 'pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall' (Proverbs 16:18). Dante saw it as a root of all sins: '[T]hat first archetype of pride/ And paragon of all creation who/ Of the light impatient, fell unripe.'[1] The first souls that Dante and Virgil meet in purgatory are those who committed the sin of pride.

In the Christian tradition, the antidote to pride is humility: 'with the humble is wisdom' (Proverbs 11:2). David Hume gave to humility a status of a 'monkish' virtue, yet suggested that it should be rejected by 'men of sense' on the grounds that it does 'serve to no manner of purpose'.[2] Hume's objection to humility is, to an extent, understandable: it can have certain overtones such as self-condemnation or low self-confidence. However, this is a mistaken view of humility. Bernard of Clairvaux defines humility as 'the virtue by which a man recognizes his own unworthiness because he really knows himself'.[3] In other words humility involves honesty with oneself and perhaps sensitive honesty with others. It involves absence of arrogance, but not a poor self-esteem. Ladislaus Boros SJ[4] suggests that 'humility is the experience of one's own unworthiness, that simply admitted, turns to worthiness'. He believes that humility 'requires spiritual greatness to accept greatness', to limit oneself in the face of the great.

Humility is not the same as lowness. According to Boros, it is anchored in the same depth of the soul as magnanimity: it is a respect for the infinite that dwells within us but with which we are not identical. Tom Ripley's broken existence was disconnected from that place in his soul. Recognition of his unworthiness would have led him to a contentment that he was driven to seek in the wrong places and via the wrong methods because he never confronted himself honestly. Such honest confrontation is where the true adventure of being human starts; it is in our deepest self that we find that all we have has been given to us; it is here where we learn to negotiate between self-promotion and self-deprecation in the hope of finding self-worth. The mask of pride blurs our vision and so makes it impossible for us to achieve the openness to ourselves and grateful attentiveness to the reality around us that humility requires. There is a Master who can teach us what this means: 'Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you shall find rest for your souls' (Mt 11:29).

Dr Anna Abram is Head of Pastoral and Social Studies at Heythrop College, University of London.

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[1] Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Paradiso, Canto XIX, lines 46-49

[2] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Rev. Ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Oxford University. Press, 1998, p. 73

[3] Bernard of Clairvaux, 'On the Steps of Humility and Pride' in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G.R. Evans, NY: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 103

[4] *Meeting God in Man*, London: Burns and Oates, 1968, pp. 130-131