

W3

Al-Ghazali's Ihyā 'ulum al-din 'Revival of
the Religious Sciences'.

BOOK 29 Warning against arrogance, self-
amazement

An adapted and abridged translation by Thaqib Mahmood

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Treatment of Pride and Acquiring Humility

Pride is a cause of perdition, and everyone has it. Removing pride is a personal obligation (fard 'ayn). It requires treatment and medicine to suppress it, not just wishful thinking. There are two steps to treating pride:

1. Eradicating its root and uprooting its tree from the heart's plantation.
2. Driving away thoughts that lead to arrogance.

The first step is removing its root, and its treatment involves both theory and practice. A cure from pride cannot be achieved without both.

Understanding oneself and recognising Allah, exalted is He, dispels pride. Knowing oneself reveals inferiority, while knowing Allah's glory emphasises His greatness. While discussing these topics in detail takes time, developing humility offers great benefit. A few verses from Allah's Book, such as: {[But only too often] man destroys himself: how stubbornly does he deny the truth! [Does man ever consider] out of what substance [God] creates him? Out of a drop of sperm, He builds him, and thereupon determines his nature, and then makes it easy for him to go through life; and in the end, He causes him to die and brings him to the grave; and then, if it be His will, He shall raise him to life], reflect man's creation and life cycle.

Regarding the beginning of man's creation, he was not a tangible being; he existed in the realm of non-existence (adam) for ages. Then Allah fashioned him from the most inferior and despised material, for He created him out of dust (turab), then from a drop of sperm (nutfa), then from a germ-cell ('alaça), then from an embryonic lump (mudgha). Subsequently, He made him of bones and covered those bones with flesh.

This marks man's start as a conscious being, initially inanimate and imperfect, created from a sperm drop and gaining traits over time. Allah emphasises His blessing by easing life's journey until death.

Allah created man from dust and a drop of sperm, emerging from non-existence so he might recognise his humble origin and himself. Allah's favour enables man to understand His glory and majesty, which only He deserves. How can pride arise when man's origins are so modest, being the lowest and weakest?

Regarding man's ultimate purpose, Allah's statement implies death: {... and in the end He causes him to die and brings him to the grave; and then, if it be His will, He shall raise him to life}. Allah will take away his spirit, senses, knowledge, and power, returning him to an inanimate state, as at the beginning. He will then be buried, become a corpse, and decay bones (ramim).

Man turns to dust and is forgotten. Allah will resurrect him for trials, as He wills. Why be arrogant or rejoice temporarily? True humility is demonstrated through actions—humbling oneself before Allah and mankind by practising humility, as outlined.

The second step concerns pride arrived at by means of these seven mentioned causes.

1. Lineage. Pride in one's lineage is ignorance, rooted in arrogance from admiration of others' perfection. As said:

Were you to be proud of parents with nobility
Right, you would be, but evil is what they have begotten.

If someone boasts of their lineage but is mean in manners, how can they compensate with others' virtues? They should understand their true ancestry and recognise their real father and grandfather. Since their immediate parent is just a sperm drop and their distant grandfather dust, how can they be genuinely proud?

2. Beauty. To truly understand beauty, look inward with intelligence, not like beasts. This awareness reveals qualities that damage self-esteem, as despicable traits are attached to oneself. Neglecting personal hygiene even for a day results in dirt and foul smell, making one worse than neglected animals. Like ugliness, beauty isn't entirely controllable, so it shouldn't be boastful. Reflecting on these aspects helps rid pride along with superficial beauty.

3. Strength. A person recognises that illness and disease demand understanding and realises that even minor injuries can incapacitate him- like a nerve in his hand or an ant entering his nose. He acknowledges that animals like donkeys, cows, or camels are stronger than him. Therefore, what pride is there in a trait animals surpass humans in?

4. Wealth and 5. many supporters represent a kind of pride that extends beyond oneself, unlike beauty, strength, and knowledge, making it the worst kind of pride. Those proud of property are like someone proud of their horse or house, but if these are lost, they are humiliated. Such pride is rooted in ignorance. Reflecting on this, one would see that others, even within the Jewish community, surpass them in wealth. True pride is low when others can take it instantly, leading to shame and poverty.

6. Knowledge. This is one of the gravest faults and the last to respond to correction except through great resilience and effort. This is because the significance of knowledge is highly esteemed in the sight of Allah, as well as in the eyes of people. It is, in fact, more important than wealth, beauty, and other possessions. A scholar cannot avoid pride unless he realises two things: first, that Allah's proof over the scholar is certain, for the crime of one who knowingly disobeys Allah, exalted is He, is most detestable. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: 'On the Day of Judgement, the scholar will be brought and thrown into hell, and as a consequence his intestines will spill out. He will turn with them like an ass would turn round a mill. Then the folk of hell will gather around him and ask him: "What is the matter with you?" He will answer: "I used to command goodness but never practised it, and prohibit evil but engaged in

Allah likens a person with knowledge but no action to an ass carrying books, referencing the Jewish doctors. No matter how great a scholar, he should remember the danger of pride, which is only deserving of Allah. Pride breeds Allah's dislike, while humility pleases Him. Scholars should act humbly to remove pride and follow God's commands.

7. Piety and worship. This kind of pride also presents a significant challenge for servants. The way to eliminate it is by forcing oneself to be humble towards all other servants. One must also understand that, in any situation, one should not be arrogant towards anyone whom one surpasses in knowledge. For Allah, exalted is He, says: {.. Say: Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?}.⁰ You should not be proud of someone who is not a scholar, because sins of the heart, such as pride, resentful envy, and ostentation, may creep into your inner self, causing you to be disliked in the sight of Allah.

Key points: Treatment of Pride and Acquiring Humility

1. The core message of the text emphasises that humility stems from understanding our humble origins, created from dust and a sperm drop, and recognising Allah's greatness. This awareness dispels pride, encourages humility through actions, and highlights our transient existence and eventual return to dust, with ultimate resurrection for trials.
2. True pride should not be based on lineage or superficial ancestry, but rather on personal virtue and character. Boasting about noble origins is meaningless if one's manners are mean, as genuine pride comes from inner qualities, not inherited status.
3. True beauty stems from inward qualities and self-awareness. Neglecting personal hygiene diminishes one's dignity, much like that of animals, and beauty isn't entirely controllable, making arrogance unwarranted. Reflecting on these aspects helps shed pride and superficiality.
4. Superficial pride in wealth and material possessions is considered the worst kind of pride because it is rooted in ignorance and can easily be lost, leading to shame. True pride is humble and resilient, unlike pride based on transient material things.
5. The key point of this passage is that humility is essential in serving others and worshipping Allah. It emphasises avoiding arrogance toward those who may have less knowledge or status, as pride and other negative inner traits can lead to Allah's disapproval.

Testing Humility

The knowledge helps remove pride from the heart, but learning alone can lead the soul to falsely claim humility. True humility requires action and testing the soul through humble deeds, especially where pride emerges. To do this, one must examine their inner self with tests to reveal what lies within.

The initial test consists of debating a specific theme with peers. If you recognise some truth in your opponent's speech but find it difficult to accept or admit, it reveals a deeply rooted pride within you. Therefore, you should cultivate God-fearingness and work to address this pride.

The second test involves social gatherings with peers and friends, where you give them priority and walk behind them. If this feels bothersome, it indicates pride. You should persist in practising this diligently until the discomfort disappears.

The third test involves responding to the poor's invitation and going to the marketplace to gather what relatives and friends require. If this task feels burdensome, it indicates pride, and one should work on overcoming it.

The fourth test is to bring one's needs and the needs of one's family from the marketplace to one's home. If one's soul refuses to do this, then this is [an indication of pride or ostentation.

The fifth test involves wearing worn-out clothes: if the soul feels disgusted by them in public, it indicates ostentation; if it feels disgusted in solitude, it suggests pride.

Understand, then, that those who are unaware of evil cannot avoid it, and those who do not understand a disease cannot treat it.

The Goal of Spiritual Discipline behind the Trait of Humility

This trait, like all others, has two extremes and a middle ground. The excess side is pride, the shortage side is humiliation, and the balanced state is humility. It is commendable to be humble without degrading oneself. Those who prioritise themselves above their peers are proud, while those who defer to others are humble, meaning they have voluntarily lowered their own standing.