

Bragging, Boasting, and Crowing:

The Ethics of Sharing One's Glad Tidings with Others

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As a first attempt to understand bragging, one might look to the world of baseball. Baseball legend Dizzy Dean is alleged to have quipped, "Braggin's only when you ain't got nothin' to back it up." Another baseball player, Al Oliver, agrees: "There's no such thing as bragging. You're either lying or telling the truth." So it may seem that someone can be held to be engaged in bragging only if her claims about herself are somehow exaggerated or overstated. But, contra these esteemed sluggers, it seems that even truthful claims about oneself can count as bragging. Many of the most irritating braggers of my acquaintance make claims about themselves and their accomplishments, or about their children and their children's accomplishments, that are arguably (and sickeningly) true. There is a story about me that, when I was a child, I greeted a new child on the playground by saying, "Hi, I'm the smartest girl in the school. Who are you?" If I actually did this -- and I hope the story is apocryphal -- wouldn't I have been bragging even if I was indeed the smartest girl in the school?

I want to approach this topic from a different angle, looking not at the truth or falsehood of the alleged braggart's claims, but at what they evidence about her relations to others. In writing on the related topic of arrogance, Valerie Tiberius and John D. Walker have suggested that arrogance is best understood not in terms of the accuracy or inaccuracy of the content of the arrogant person's beliefs about himself; instead, they understand arrogance as an interpersonal matter: the arrogant person draws on his beliefs about himself to structure "his relationships in hierarchical, nonreciprocal ways." But on the account I wish to pursue here, why bragging per se should be judged as morally problematic becomes more of a puzzle.

Suppose something nice has happened to me. Suppose I have just had a paper accepted by a prestigious journal or had one of my books win an award. It isn't bragging if I tell this to my mother. Indeed, one of my chief faults as a daughter is that I find it so hard to share my good news with my mother because I know she's going to gush and make a truly ridiculous fuss over me about it. My mother is thrilled by any shred of good news about me; to share that good news with her is to give her a gift. Why is this? I submit it is because she identifies with me closely enough that my good news is her good news; a good thing that happens to me delights her as much, if not more, as a good thing that happens to her -- indeed, a good thing that happens to me is a good thing that happens to her.

I might also share my good news with a colleague who gave me earlier, very helpful comments on a draft of the paper, or with my writing group who critiqued earlier versions of my book. They, too, have a stake in my success with this project, because of their contributions to it. My good friends, too, want to hear my good news, so I might rush off an e-mail alerting them to it. They want to hear my good news because they genuinely care about me.

But here one has to be more careful. Do these friends really want to hear my good news? Do they genuinely care about me? Sometimes these assumptions turn out, alas, to be unfounded. I have one friend who sends me e-mails all the time about the great glories her daughter achieves on the high-school stage and the raves her teacher offers about her at parent-teacher conferences; indeed, I even know this girl's GPA out to three decimal points. I always write back something like, "Great news! Congrats to Karen!" But if the truth be told, I really don't want to hear this so-called great news and don't particularly feel like heaping further congratulations upon Karen. But my friend thinks I do. That is to say, she thinks that I am more of a friend than I really am; she thinks I share her joy in her daughter's success more than I really do.

My puzzle is: why doesn't this say something bad about me, rather than bad about this friend? The person sharing the good news, in a way that I want to identify as bragging, is assuming

that I don't suffer from petty faults like jealousy and envy and spite. Of course some braggarts don't make this assumption: they assume that I do suffer from these faults and their project is precisely to arouse, exquisitely, these negative and painful emotions in me. But I don't want to define bragging in terms of the intentions behind the relevant behavior, but in terms of the behavior itself. Most of the braggarts I know aren't mean-spirited like this. Anthony Trollope wrote appreciatively of his mother that "She could dance with other people's legs, eat and drink with other people's palates, be proud with the lustre of other people's finery. Every mother can do this for her own daughters; but she could do it for any girl . . ." Many braggarts seem to be acting on the assumption that their audience is someone like Trollope's mother, able to be proud with the lustre of everyone else's finery. Why isn't this a generous, rather than problematic, assumption to make about one's audience? Well, some braggers, such as Karen's mother, simply spend too much time telling others their good news: they are narcissists who monopolize a conversation. It isn't the quality of what they say, but the quantity, that poses at least part of the ethical problem. In any conversation, even between the closest of intimates, there is some presumption of parity in conversational space: you say something, then I say something, then you say something. We take turns. Some of the braggers of my acquaintance don't take turns, don't leave any room in the

conversation for the other person to offer her items of achievement for reciprocal congratulation. The only lines they leave for others in the conversational script are "Great!" or "Congrats to Karen!" This same dynamic can be present in non-bragging conversations as well. Consider Socrates' conversation about the founding of the ideal city with Glaucon and Adeimantus in the Republic. Despite his alleged dislike of speechifying, he offers lengthy paragraphs punctuated only by his interlocutors' occasional exclamations, "That's true" and "Apparently" and "It looks like it." Indeed, even those sharing not their good news, but their bad news, with others, can be guilty of a narcissistic monopolizing of the others' attention. I have another friend who has been in a bad marriage since 1985. My family always knows when I'm the phone to her because they hear, on my end, long long periods of silence, and then "That's awful!" and "How could he?" At the end of an hour of her venting, she tends to remember that there is indeed a person at the other end of the phone, and exclaims, "But what about you? Now let's talk about you!" But at that point we both realize that we've talked on the phone long distance quite long enough. So one problem with at least some forms of bragging is that the bragger talks too much about herself, essentially erasing the other party to the conversation. But this doesn't locate a distinctive problem with bragging. Some braggers don't dominate a conversation; they just briskly and efficiently deliver the

news of their stunning accomplishments and move on. And many non-braggers dominate conversations as well.

Setting aside the issue of the quantity of comments one makes about oneself we might also raise the issue of the balance of positive to negative comments about oneself. A report of something wonderful seems less braggy if it is balanced by periodic reports of something terrible. My son Gregory was reading over my shoulder one day as I was sending an e-mail to my friend Brenda, in which I mentioned how good Gregory's last report card had been. "But, Mommy, that's bragging!" he told me, shocked at my breach of manners and taste. But what he didn't know was that my last e-mail to Brenda had been full of my anguish over many other family faults and failings. I tell Brenda everything, and she tells me everything, bad and good, good and bad. The bragger tends to report only the good. Even here, however, we can say in defense of the bragger: isn't it more cheering and brightening to be someone who shares the good, but not the bad, who shares the positive but nobly hides the negative? "Smile, and the world smiles with you; cry, and you cry alone." But the bragger seems to be someone who is painting a deceptively positive picture of herself: "I am a person to whom only good things happen." Thus, to return to the earlier thoughts about the truth or falsehood of a bragger's claims about herself: while each individual bragging statement may be true on its face, the overall picture the bragger presents may

nonetheless be false, because of strategic omissions. All the positive things she says about herself are indeed true, but she neglects to mention counter-balancing negative things about herself that are equally true. Thus the overall picture presented is deceptive.

And, indeed, still on the topic of truth and falsehood here, while I began by claiming that at least some braggers are truthful in reporting actual achievements that are clearly, by any measure, achievements, at least some braggers are not. While I don't think it is characteristic of the bragger to lie about her achievements, it is certainly characteristic of many braggers to rank their achievements as higher than they are -- for example, to think that their quite ordinary children show signs of remarkable genius. Now, some of this is perhaps estimable -- perhaps it is a good thing that parents err on the side of over-appreciation of their children. I myself don't think this -- I've worked with too many adults who were over-appreciated by their parents as children -- but many people do see fond over-estimation of their children's abilities as a mark of appropriate parental love. One could also overestimate oneself in this way, less appealingly, by providing an honest statement of the facts regarding one's achievements, but nonetheless ranking these achievements higher than they objectively deserve to be ranked.

For this reason, in my view, it is morally preferable to share a wonderful fact about oneself rather than a wonderful assessment of oneself. The fact has a kind of neutrality on its face (though I will challenge this alleged neutrality shortly). But assessments are overtly self-satisfied. Thus, I have one friend who told me that his daughters had just flown to New York to play the violin at Carnegie Hall. Well, yes, that is pretty impressive. However, another friend told me, without offering any similar support for the claim, that his daughter's violin-playing was "superb." That feels much more like a parent's over-estimation of his child's ability and just not the thing that one can say possibly say in a non-bragging way about oneself or one's children. I can share news of a prize I have won; but I don't think I can tell even a close friend how fully and richly I think the prize was deserved. Thus, I coach graduate students writing job letters to learn to write in a way that seems to be merely reporting facts that display their wonderfulness, without having to call attention explicitly to their wonderfulness itself. You can mention your teaching award; you can't tell them outright that you're the greatest thing since sliced bread. When I worked as a book editor, preparing publicity for a series of academic books, I even drew up a list of ostensibly descriptive words that carried an evaluative charge. "Ground-breaking" was one. You can describe

a book on your own list as "ground-breaking." It's more dubious to describe it as "brilliant."

But, as we think more about the distinction between the facts of one's achievements themselves and the way in which one assesses and evaluates these facts, the distinction starts to blur. Here, as elsewhere in philosophy, the fact/value distinction can't bear the weight we would want to place upon it. If we're talking about the ethics of sharing one's good news with others, we need to think for a moment about what we mean by news. News, by definition, is something new, different, that is to say, out of the ordinary. Even to view myself as having good news to share is to view myself as having something that others, by and large, do not have. Nozick's best line in Anarchy, State, and Utopia is that we don't assess ourselves as pretty good for having an opposable thumb and speaking at least one language. The only exception here is that parents do seem to want to share news with others of the most universally achievable milestones reached by their children: Tommy rolled over! Johnny walked! Sally made peepee in the potty! This becomes ethically problematic only when there is too great a volume of it (we don't need an e-mail for every tinkle) or when -- and now we're closing in the heart of what seems problematic about bragging -- it is framed in an essentially comparative and competitive way. Johnny walked at nine months -- with the

intended implication: so much earlier than other children! And so much earlier than your child!

The problem here, and now I think we're drawing close to the heart of what bothers us, or at least me, about bragging, is that estimation of achievement is fundamentally competitive. The braggart isn't one who says he is better than he really is, as much as the one who says he is better than others are, or better than you are. Indeed, even complainers can manifest this same self-preening assumption. They complain that they are getting less than their due, when it is clear that they think their due is far greater than what others are due, or what you are due. For example, I've had friends at the university complain to me about their obscenely low salaries -- which salaries were tens of thousands of dollars higher than mine. Now sometimes this is just good-natured universal griping that all of our salaries are too low. But if the assumption is that their salaries are especially low, and ground a special grievance, then one can't help but note the essentially comparative nature of the complaint: "My salary, while much higher than yours, is nonetheless lower than what I, but not you, are due."

Now, I have to say that sometimes braggers who accurately locate their own phenomenally high merits delight me rather than irritate me. A Reader's Digest article reports that when Irving Berlin finished writing "White Christmas," he crowed to one of

his associates, "This isn't just the best song I've ever written, it's the best song anybody's ever written." Here Berlin does everything I've just said you shouldn't do: give an overt assessment of yourself, rather than simply report a fact about yourself, and do it in an explicitly comparative way, where, indeed, the comparative class that you have bested is the entire rest of the world. And yet this kind of crowing has a certain appeal. One reason may be that, because there is a social taboo against bragging, it can be refreshing to see it defied in such an in-your-face way. Even though I'm basically defending the prohibition against bragging, there is something satisfying when bad boys and girls flagrantly break certain rules. It can also just be fun to witness unabashed, unrestrained, infectious delight in anything, even in oneself. I think here of the song from some musical that goes, "Will everyone here kindly step to the rear and let a winner lead the way?" Or Maria in West Side Story singing "I'm Pretty" to her mirror. It can get tiring to be around cringing, abject, apologetic people with no self-esteem and refreshing to be with someone who can say, "Damn it, I'm GOOD." Similarly, there is something thrilling, I submit, about being in the presence of genius, and genius that recognizes itself as genius, because after all, how could it not? Mozart knew he was good. "White Christmas," sung by Bing Crosby, did go on to become the number one best-selling single of all time. In Noel Streatfeild's

wonderful children's classic, Ballet Shoes, Posy Fossil knows that she is destined to become one of the world's greatest ballerinas. "When I dance," Posy tells her sisters, "nobody else will do instead of me; they'll come to see me, and if I'm not there, they'll just go home." While Pauline and Petrova promptly snub her for the remark, Petrova later goes to sleep "puzzling over what Posy had just said. She did not believe it was conceitedness when Posy said things like that, but it certainly was when Pauline did. Why?"

Part of the answer to Petrova's question may be that when Posy says this it is simply true -- forcing us to acknowledge again the partial truth of the accuracy account of bragging. But the other part of the answer is that when someone is that good, competition, at least for most of us, ceases to be an issue. I may compete against my colleagues in the philosophy department, but I don't see myself as competing against John Stuart Mill. In fact, when I was in graduate school at Princeton, I felt I was in the presence of so many truly brilliant philosophers that nothing about their achievement diminished me. We were batting in different leagues altogether.

But now I need to say that this is true of very few of my bragger acquaintances. Perhaps one of the most irritating features of their bragging is that seem to think that they are utterly out of my league in this way, so that I will be honored rather than depressed by recognition of their greatness. They

think that just knowing a prodigy like their Sophie is an enormous honor and privilege for me. But I can tell you right now: it is not!

Along these same lines, reflecting on how true greatness doesn't diminish others, there is some news that is indeed too wonderful not to share, where deliberate silence about one's good news could only be viewed as making extremely uncharitable assumptions about one's audience. For example, there was a time when I and many of my friends were struggling with infertility. Then one by one, each friend in the circle finally became pregnant. It was always an awkward moment when the news of the forthcoming blessed event was announced to others who had previously shared the painful camaraderie of the infertile. For the news had to be shared -- it would soon be all too visible and public anyway. And the news was received by others in the circle with some pain and almost a sense of betrayal -- why her, and not me? how could she abandon me in this way? But when I had friends who made too much of this kind of worry -- poor Claudia! how can I tell her my great and amazing news? -- it began to seem insulting to me, rather than merely considerate of my understandably delicate feelings. For I was certainly a big enough person to be able to celebrate someone else's joy in this way. After all, I would have had to have been pretty sick and self-absorbed not to be deeply glad that a dear friend was achieving her desperately desired dream.

We have come full circle now, to our initial question: why don't we see the garden-variety bragger in this same way, as willing to assume that I am a big enough person to be able to share his joy in his success? Well, to recapitulate some of our earlier points: 1) many braggers monopolize the conversation, taking up too much space relating their good news; 2) many braggers, even while presenting their good news accurately, nonetheless paint an overall distorted picture of their lives by failing to share any of their counterbalancing bad news; 3) many braggers, even while presenting their good news accurately, nonetheless have a false sense of the significance of this news, using it to ground a higher evaluation of themselves than is objectively justified; 4) many braggers at least implicitly take their good news to ground a favorable comparison to others, and in particular, to you.

Now, perhaps I still haven't answered the question of why this latter feature of bragging should bother me so much. Why is it so terrible if someone else scores better than I do at the comparison in question? Well, in my defense, I can say first that the bragger thinks this is significant, or she wouldn't take the time and energy to brag: for her, scoring higher than someone else, scoring higher than me, is news worth reporting. All I can say here is that the perhaps generous assumption made by the bragger, that while she is competitive enough to want to announce her success to me, I am, by contrast, a completely non-

competitive person who will selflessly delight in hearing about her success, is simply false. And I suspect that the assumption that you are a completely non-competitive person is simply false, as well. We may want to work together to diminish such competitive feelings, for, as Rawls has told us, envy is irrational and collectively disadvantageous: why, after all, should I wish that someone else has less of x if it doesn't give me a whit more of it? Why should I wish for another's diminishment for its own sake? And I don't -- or at least, I hardly ever do, the occasional pleasures of shaden-freude aside. (A new book explores the phenomenon of our barely suppressed glee when, according to its title, "Bad Things Happen to Other People"). But a certain degree of competitiveness seems either hard-wired into human beings as animal creatures striving for success in nature's mating game, or encouraged by our capitalist culture. We remain complex, competitive, flawed human beings who can only stand so much good news -- to paraphrase the writer Anne Lamott -- about "some of the most awful, angry, undeserving [people] you know -- people who are, in other words, not you."

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Sources: The baseball quotes circulated to me over e-mail; for the growing philosophical literature on arrogance and modesty, see Valerie Tiberius and John D. Walker, "Arrogance," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 35 (1998); G. F. Schueler, "Why Modesty Is a Virtue," Ethics, vol. 107 (1997); Julia Driver, "Modesty and Ignorance," Ethics, vol. 109 (1999); G. F. Schueler, "Why IS Modesty a Virtue," Ethics, vol. 109 (1999); A. T. Nuyen, "Just Modesty," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 35 (1998); Michael Ridge, "Modesty as a Virtue," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 37 (2000). Other sources are Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (University of California Press, 1947); Plato, Republic, trans. G.A.A. Grube (Hackett, 1992); Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (Basic Books, 1974); Jody Rosen, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," Reader's Digest (December 2002); Noel Streatfeild, Ballet Shoes (Random House, 1937); John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Harvard University Press, 1971); John Portmann, When Bad Things Happen to Other People (Routledge, 1999); Anne Lamott, Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life (Random House, 1994).