

## AMBITION

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*This is a draft and comments are welcome!*

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In his great and underestimated work of moral philosophy, in the context of his consideration of the extent to which we may share or sympathize with the feelings and passions of others, Adam Smith pauses to attend to the phenomenon of ambition. In so doing, he poses, almost plaintively, a general query: “[T]o what purpose is all the toil and bustle of this world?” (TMS, 50). The point of our “toil and bustle,” says Smith, is not so much the goods we produce as the attention we receive: “it is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty” (TMS 50).

Smith is not the only eighteenth-century thinker to take up the idea of ambition, but he is one of the more worried, and this fact may seem surprising. However, Smith’s concerns may follow from his reading of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Nonetheless, one might have thought the author of the *Wealth of Nations* might embrace strongly the idea of ambition. But Smith is not alone in his misgivings. Indeed, the notion of ambition is of a broader interest, even though Smith offers a tantalizing and important analysis. If Smith is worried about ambition, then so does ambition have a worried history. In the first section of this paper, I shall recount, in rapid fashion, some of that history, if only to highlight salient aspects of a rather elusive concept. In the second section I turn to Smith’s considerations, noting how his worries

seem to rest uneasily with his claim, several times voiced in the *Wealth of Nations*, that individuals have a general desire to better their condition, a universal desire (WN, II.iii.36) inborn “from the womb” (WN, II.iii.28). It may turn out that there is a blameworthy form of ambition (worthy worrying about!) and another that may be regarded, more properly, as innocent. The historical concerns that occupy these first two sections have their proper interest but they also resonate more broadly. In the third section I draw from these historical considerations—both general and Smithian—to set forth an account of the concept of ambition.

### I. Ambition, Some Historical Reflections

Prior to further discussion, it is worth noting that the idea of ambition is amorphous and used in various senses. In its nominative form, ambition is sometimes employed to indicate little more than desire or the particular goal or object of desire. In these instances we have a derivative use of “ambition,” sometimes ironic. For example, in one of his interviews Andy Warhol says of one of his associates, Brigid Berlin, “Her only ambition is to lose weight, so she doesn’t do anything” (Goldsmith, 257). And in Quentin Tarantino’s (less than successful) film *Jackie Brown*, the character played by Samuel L. Jackson arrives home at 2:00 in the afternoon to find Bridget Fonda lying on the sofa smoking dope. He tells her that if “you smoke too much of that . . . it will rob you of your ambition”; she responds, “Not if your ambition is to get high and watch TV.” Fonda takes the idea of ambition and reduces it to nothing more than a desire—“to get high and watch TV.”<sup>i</sup>

If we turn from pop culture, then we quickly discover that the idea of ambition, as featured across the ages, is more than a desire. It was in ancient Rome that candidates for political office might walk about seeking votes, perhaps by bribery. This early form of *ambitio*

was obviously connected both to power and to a public. Neither the idea of nor the worry regarding ambition commences in Rome. In the *Gorgias*, Callicles, the pupil of Gorgias, criticizes Socrates for wasting time with philosophy, rather than employing oratory to attain power so as satisfy any appetite. Plato allows, nonetheless, for a proper end to ambition. In the *Symposium*, the passion for immortality is the great end of life. As Diotima explains, “the nobler he is, the greater his ambition, because he is in love with the eternal” (208e); indeed, after listening to Socrates relate the lessons of Diotima, Alcibiades admits, “while I’m spending time on politics I am neglecting all the things that are crying for attention in myself” (216a). The sense that some ends are worthy of pursuit and others not is endorsed by Aristotle in his account of the virtue concerned with small honors: the vice of ambition, he explains, results not only from an excessive desire for honor but from seeking it from the wrong source (1125b 21-23). Ambition is here and elsewhere taken to incorporate an end that is less than worthy. The book of Proverbs counsels that wisdom is to be preferred above rubies (3:15) or gold (16:16); Augustine recounts how ambition drew him to rhetoric and eloquence (III.iv, p. 40). But Augustine realized how he was pursuing only “the emptiness of popular glory and the applause of spectators” (IV.i, p. 55). The reference to “emptiness” returns us again to Plato and foreshadows Adam Smith. For it is not simply that ambition incorporates ends that are less than ideal but that ambition does not, in fact, deliver what it promises. Just as Augustine laments the “emptiness of popular glory” so does Plato’s critique of oratory pivot on the way in which the attainments of the ambitious orator are apparent rather than real.

By the time that Montaigne is writing, he revisits the idea that ambition, now cast in terms of “glory,” offers nothing to fill a “hollow and empty” soul (702-3), even as he admits “an indescribable pleasure in being praised” (710). Seeking to divorce genuine virtue from any

foundation in public approval,<sup>ii</sup> Montaigne points out, as Spinoza would as well<sup>iii</sup>, that glory is “fickle” (706). As he reduces “honour and glory” to nothing “more than the favourable judgement men make of us” (709), Montaigne does something else: he casts the public in less than flattering ways. If virtue, for example, is grounded in approval alone, then “we have recourse to the votes of the common people and of the mob, that mother of ignorance, of injustice and of inconstancy” (709). In another essay, “The Tale of Spurina,” Montaigne suggests that ambition is comparable to covetousness: it is not only insatiable (826) but its energy is “sharpened and increased” by its success (826). Montaigne illustrates his concern with the example of Julius Caesar, whose amorous passion yields only to something stronger, ambition (827). Indeed it was by ambition, Montaigne attests, that Caesar “willed to seek his own glory from the destruction and overthrow of his country” (830).

Glory, along with honor or fame, is often linked with ambition. Like ambition, this trio of concepts relates to recognition, but it is not obvious that any one is equivalent to ambition, or that any two of these—glory, honor, fame—are identical.<sup>iv</sup> In Hobbes’ estimate, the desire for glory—a desire not simply to outdo but to enjoy one’s power—is one of the conditions (along with competition and distrust) that create a state of war out of a state of nature. One might well think that Hobbes would be the pre-eminent modern thinker for any study of ambition. And he certainly allies ambition with some of the dangerous elements of the human spirit (avarice, lust), even characterizing the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, as one in which the devil arrives to “inflame the ambition” of Eve (*Leviathan*, 134). However, if we think ambition has something to do with public recognition, then the most relevant modern thinker may be Bernard Mandeville, the author of *The Fable of the Bees*. Mandeville maintains that actual moral standards (as opposed to some putatively rational but unrealized notion of virtue) are generated out of selfish

passions as these are redirected to serving others while nonetheless serving the self. How does this redirection take place? Through the praise and flattery of others! By flattery we are coaxed into reorienting our ends and purposes so that our actual deeds are cooperative rather than uncooperative. (Mandeville was influenced by French thinkers, including the already mentioned Montaigne but also La Rochefoucauld and Jacques Abbadie who emphasizes how “nous aymons à être estimés” (see Lovejoy, 160).)<sup>v</sup>

The idea that our standards of moral judgment, even our identities, find constitutive power in what others think is, in significant part, a crucial element of David Hume’s accounts of the passions and morals. Whereas many thinkers, including classical thinkers as well as, more recently, Shaftesbury,<sup>vi</sup> link ambition to avarice in a kind of guilt by association, Hume has a more sanguine view. Avarice, he suggests, is the “spur of industry” (93) and “the desire of gain” is a “universal passion” (“Rise of Arts and Sciences,” 113), as is ambition.<sup>vii</sup> Ambition, he suggests, is a pleasurable activity analogous to “study, or conversation” (“Of Refinement in the Arts,” 269). Indeed, Hume remarks that the ambitions of many persons can “commonly be satisfied by excelling in their particular profession, and thereby promoting the interests of society”, though Hume points, wittily, to an exception: “The ambition of the clergy can often be satisfied only by promoting ignorance and superstition and implicit faith and pious frauds”. (“Of National Characters, fn3, 200).

Hume offers no explicit account of ambition, but it appears to be one of his indirect passions, whose most notable members include pride. As Hume puts it, “everything related to us, which produces pleasure or pain, produces likewise pride or humility” (T291). A particular house may have the quality of beauty, itself a pleasurable quality, but if that house is related to oneself then the pleasure of the beauty generates the pleasurable passion of pride whose “object,”

as Hume puts it, is the self. The particular items about which we may feel a pride or humility would seem to be, to a great extent determined by social consensus, as influenced by the operation of sympathy, that process by which we communicate the feelings and valuations of others. If, however, the passion of ambition is to be different from that of pride, then the item that elicits ambition must be distinct from what brings us pride. After all, the proud person may be relatively unambitious, having not had to work or strive for the goods or status. How might we distinguish pride and ambition? Although Hume rejects Mandeville's egoism he retains the Mandevillean insight into the power of praise: the opinion of others is especially pleasing, for Hume maintains, it "confirms the good opinion we have of ourselves" (T321). The key to drawing a distinction, even if Humean rather than Hume's, may be found in Hume's later essay, "Of Refinement in the Arts." There Hume sets forth a positive account of productive activity along with an equally positive account of the commodities produced by that activity.<sup>viii</sup> A Humean account of ambition draws from Hume's embrace of activity to suggest that the ambitious agent manifests a particular kind of pride whose motivating cause is not simply riches, power or beauty but the activity that leads to these ends. The ambitious person wants the public to recognize him as the achiever and doer—the producer of the good, the one who has attained status or rank.

Hume understands ambition as a natural phenomenon and, at least within commercial society, fairly innocuous. Rousseau estimates matters differently and his account leads us to Adam Smith. The problem with ambition is, for Rousseau, the problem of civilized man. Whereas the savage feels "true needs" (*Discourse*, 57), the person within society is pushed to appearances rather than realities; as a result there emerges "consuming ambition, the zeal for raising the relative level of his fortune, less out of real need than in order to put himself above

others” (*Discourse*, 68). Ambition has, for Rousseau, a comparative element. In this way ambition relates to *amour-propre* or egocentrism. Distinct from the love of self, which is natural and can be properly channeled by reason into virtue, egocentrism is not natural but “relative, artificial and born in society, [and] moves each individual to value himself more than anyone else, which inspires in men all the evils they cause on another, and which is the true source of honor” (*Discourse*, 106). Unlike Hume, Rousseau views ambition as dangerous and capable of “inspir[ing] in all men a wicked tendency to harm one another” even as “it often wears the mask of benevolence” (*Discourse*, 68). As Rousseau proceeds it is the “ambitious” who subject “the entire human race to labor, servitude and misery” (*Discourse*, 70) and it is the citizens who “driven by blind ambition” and seeking thereby to gain power and status above others “allow themselves to be oppressed” (*Discourse*, 77). It is not simply that ambition is dangerous but that it encourages pointless activity: “the citizen is always active and in a sweat, always agitated, and unceasingly tormenting himself in order to seek still more laborious occupations” (80). By ambition we are divorced one from genuine needs (the ambitious person effectively “renounces life in order to acquire immortality”); and we degrade ourselves merely to attain the honor of the great or powerful. For these reasons Rousseau concludes, “the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others” (81).

In a “Letter to the Edinburgh Review (1755-56),” Adam Smith addresses Rousseau’s *Discourse*. After noting Rousseau’s debt to Mandeville, Smith remarks that according to Rousseau, “some unfortunate accidents have given birth to the unnatural passions of ambition and the vain desire of superiority” (250).<sup>ix</sup> To give the reader a sample of Rousseau’s thoughts, Smith then draws several lengthy quotations, including the long paragraph in which Rousseau refers to an “insatiable ambition, an ardor to raise his relative fortune” as well as the penultimate

paragraph from which the quotations above are taken. It is a striking fact, therefore, that when Smith writes about Rousseau (and so shortly after the publication of the *Discourse*) he places special emphasis on Rousseau's references to ambition.

## **II. Adam Smith on Ambition**

When Smith turns to the subject of ambition (in section III of Part 1 of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) he asserts, "it is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty" (TMS 50). As it turns out, however, the "toil and bustle of this world" is not so much for the utilitarian advantages of the products of our labor as it is for the attention and recognition of others. That the recognition of the public proves attractive is, for Smith, to be understood in light of his account of human psychology. For example, when two persons share a similarity of sentiments, feelings, or emotions then they experience sympathy. But sympathy is also pleasurable, and even more relevant, a sympathy with pleasant sentiments is easier than sympathy with unpleasant. As spectators observe that an agent has attained some position of prestige or acquired wealth, the spectators imagine themselves in the agent's circumstances and thereby enjoy a pleasant sentiment, but the agent also imagines himself in the circumstances of the spectators and discovers, thereby, a new and multiplied pleasure, that of sympathy: "At the thought of this, his heart seems to swell and dilate itself within him, and he is fonder of his wealth, upon this account, than for all the other advantages it procures him" (I.iii.2.1). Whether or not the agent intentionally desires the attention of others, Smith still maintains that it is ambition that motivates our regard to wealth or power and that the aim of ambition is not so much the goods that our labours produce as it is the sympathetic attention that is garnered thereby.



It is striking that Smith presents this case so strongly: “it is *chiefly* from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches . . .” (TMS 50, italics added). In part, he may have been affected by Rousseau’s account. For just as Rousseau suggests that ambitious striving involves needless labor and the loss of independence and liberty, so does Smith articulate something similar when he describes the “man of rank and distinction” who is “the object of the observation and fellow-feeling of every body about him”:

It is this, which, notwithstanding the restraint it imposes, notwithstanding the loss of liberty with which it is attended renders greatness the object of envy, and compensates, in the opinion of mankind, all that toil, all that anxiety, all those mortifications which must be undergone in the pursuit of it; and what is of yet more consequence, all that leisure, all that ease, all that careless security, which are forfeited for ever by the acquisition (TMS, 51).<sup>x</sup>

Yet as Smith proceeds in his discussion he draws a distinction. Recall that his first and strong claim is that it is “chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind” that we strive for status and wealth. However, a few pages later, his words suggest that such effort may be less dominating than at first glimpse. After noting the importance of gaining “sympathy and attention” Smith concludes: “And thus, place, that great object which divides the wives of alderman, is the end of half the labours of human life” (TMS 57). Smith has moved from asserting that our labours are “chiefly” aimed at the sentiments of mankind, to a weaker one, that our attention to the opinions of others consumes but “half” our labours. So the degree to which ambition fuels our activity may be less than at first meets the eye.

Another distinction remains. When Smith commences his examination he seems to ally ambition to the drive to better one’s circumstances (“ . . .and what are the advantages which we

propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition?" TMS 50). However, as mentioned above, the idea of "bettering one's condition" is, at least in the *Wealth of Nations*, a universal desire (WN, II.iii.36: 345-346) and inborn ('with us from the womb' WN, II.iii.28: 341). Such a drive need not even be narrowly self-interested (or function in absence of other desires, benevolent or not). After all, the condition to be ameliorated may be some circumstance related only to self, in which case the desire is self-interested, or it may be the condition of the family, in which case the desire is grounded in the well-being of others.<sup>xi</sup> Given how Smith understands the notion of "bettering one's condition" it is surprising that he links it with ambition.<sup>xii</sup>

How can we understand this seeming inconsistency? When Smith initiates his consideration he first articulates a general concern about a human propensity to ambition. However, as he proceeds his words serve to distinguish a corrupting and blameworthy ambition from one that is more innocent (an ambition to better one's condition). To see more fully how this might be the case, let us detour, briefly, to Smith's theory of the passions, for ambition is a passion. Passions may, in Smith's view, be classified by origin—the bodily or imaginative—or by their content, particularly as it relates to others. Ambition is imaginative but it is also selfish, rather than social or unsocial. Social passions (such as generosity or benevolence) manifest an agreeable sentiment towards others), the unsocial (such as hatred or resentment) a disagreeable sentiment), but the selfish passions occupy a "middle space" and concern the *self*. In the minimal and non-blameworthy sense, a selfish passion is merely a passion that relates to the self: these passions of sadness or joy are *selfish* in a way that a color might be reddish. Just as a reddish color might be close to or related to red, so are these passions related to the self.

Thus, grief and joy relate to the self but in so doing they need not be blameworthy. However, on those occasions that we feel grief and joy about our material or personal fortune, our passions may become selfish in a stronger and morally blameworthy sense. It is here that a selfish passion not only concerns the self but manifests the agent's failure to take within his ambit the actions or feelings of others. Such an omission is morally blameworthy. For example, to express joy about the accomplishment of one's child is to have passion whose content is related to self. To express this joy in the presence of someone who is grieving over the loss of a child is to have a passion that is selfish.

As a selfish passion, ambition may either be relatively innocent and non-blameworthy, or it may flourish at the expense of other persons or goods, and therefore become blameworthy. As his discussion proceeds, Smith allows for a non-blameworthy ambition, "which when it keeps within the bounds of prudence and justice, is always admired in the world" (TMS, III.6.7). In this sense, ambition suggests enterprise and industry, rather than a single-minded pursuit of attention or distinction. This sort of ambition remains consistent with bettering one's condition. After all, Smith maintains, much later in the *Moral Sentiments*, "Even a tradesman is thought a poor-spirited fellow among his neighbours, who does not bestir himself to get what they call an extraordinary job, or some common advantage" (TMS III.6.7). Smith makes clear that "the man of inferior rank" may find distinction by practicing "more important virtues" than, say, the court virtues of politeness (TMS, I.iii.2.5). The traditional virtues, rather than any overweening desire to gain attention and notoriety, are also the traits of commercial endeavor (Berry, 1999; Hanley, 112). Indeed, when persons of "inferior rank" may be ambitious theirs does not, typically, lead to vanity: "vanity is always founded upon the belief of our being the object of attention and

approbation. The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world. . .” (TMS, 50-1).<sup>xiii</sup>

However, the ambition that worries Smith is a blameworthy kind in which one seeks distinction and attention via the pursuit of wealth or power. After his initial consideration of ambition in Part III of the TMS, Smith returns to the topic in Part IV. There Smith elaborates on the ‘poor man’s son whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition’ (TMS IV.i.8: 181-183). Smith’s concern, in this instance, is precisely that the poor man’s son has replaced the solid goals of prudence, bettering his condition, with a (blameworthy) ambition for great wealth. This young man “is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity . . . [and] he submits . . . to more fatigue of body and more uneasiness of mind than he could have suffered through the whole of his life from the want of them [these conveniencies]” (TMS, 181). Moreover this young man “serves those whom he hates, and is obsequious to those whom he despises” (TMS, 181). Only in his old age does this man realize that the conveniences for which he labored bear no utility greater than those enjoyed by a person of lesser wealth.<sup>xiv</sup> If we consider why we think so highly of wealth and riches, Smith says, it is not so much because of their utility (conveniences) as it is that they these represent a contrived means to happiness: “it is the ingenious and artful adjustment of those means to the end for which they were intended, that is the principal source of his admiration” (TMS 182). It at this stage, situated within a critique of utility, that Smith considers how our real attraction to wealth and riches is a fascination with mechanisms to utility, and the manner in which certain items appear to be “adapted to promote their ease, to prevent their wants, to gratify their wishes” (TMS, 183). This fascination is, he suggests, a deception: We believe that these items generate a utility when in fact it is really the adjustment of means to ends that attracts us.

But does this explanation offer another inconsistency? This account seems to differ from Smith's earlier version in which ambition pivots on public attention; in this second account we have a version of ambition which turns on the idea that our fascination with the conveniences of the great is in fact not because of the utility of the conveniences but because we are attracted by "the beauty of order, of art and contrivance" (TMS 185). Are these views reconcilable? The first view emphasizes how ambition is oriented to the public: the ambitious person seeks to be recognized by a larger public and thereby pursues wealth and power. The second view suggests that the ambitious person is self-deceived: this individual thinks that he pursues the conveniences of the wealthy because of their utility when in fact what draws his enormous effort is less the expected utility than the way in which the goods seem *designed* to generate utility!

As set out, these accounts are consistent, at least if one assumes that the ambitious person may have multiple motivations. In each instance the ambitious person seeks to better his condition; in so doing the ambitious person believes, incorrectly, that the goods are desired for their utility, even as it is not so much the utility that draws us as the *contrivance* for utility. This contrivance is what the spectators also find fascinating. When Smith describes the poor man's son he is not abandoning his earlier account so much as deepening it. The ambitious agent pursues conveniences because that agent enjoys the attention of the spectators. The spectators believe that they admire wealth and greatness because of the utility of the goods enjoyed by the wealthy. However, the utility of these goods is not much greater than what is enjoyed by someone of lesser station.

The real problem is that the poor man's son is possessed of a blameworthy ambition. Unlike other persons of "inferior rank" the poor man's son is not prudent but vain. A blameworthy passion of ambition may root easily in a creature prone to self-love, an affection for

self that Smith also finds powerful. So the poor man's son embarks down the wayward path to 'wealth and greatness' rather than through the gate to virtue. The signal problem with the passion of ambition is that it is difficult to corral: 'when once it has got entire possession of the breast, [it] will admit neither a rival nor a successor' (TMS, I.iii.2.7: 57). Ambition of the problematic sort seems to be a passion energized too strongly, if not solely, by the desire of public acclaim. Yet a proper ambition may be possible, one in which the desire for distinction is modest, governed by virtue, and occurring within the context of desiring other goods. Smith's perspective recalls something important: The human being is a complex creature for whom the appeal of recognition has particular corrupting powers.

### **III. Ambition Reconsidered**

The considerations set forth above are varied and multiple. What do they tell us, if anything? At a minimum they provide a context for developing a plausible narrative outline of a conception of ambition. Such a conception may not encapsulate all relevant uses of the term, but it may set forth one *salient* conception that shows how ambition is something more than a desire.

As a first step, it seems clear that ambition involves the pursuit of (and not just the desire for) for something deemed good. To pursue something is not simply to desire it but to seek to bring into realization the thing desired. Such a pursuit is not momentary or episodic but active and, in various ways, measured and progressive: the ambitious person desires some end and takes regular steps towards its attainment. Obviously, there is a temporal component here, one not easy to specify. The ambitious pursuit is steady, though it need not be obsessive or exaggerated, only recurring and continual.

What sort of thing is pursued? As indicated, the agent must regard it as good, even if its realization may not, as Smith suggested, deliver the utility promised. But its goodness should not be a relative only to the agent. More precisely, the agent must *believe* that others also regard the object as good. In this sense, the agent believes that the object of pursuit has intersubjective value.<sup>xv</sup> Must the object in fact have intersubjective value? An agent's belief may be sufficient but the more plausible scenario is that the agent's belief is true: others do value the object that the agent pursues.<sup>xvi</sup> However, that other persons value the object need not entail that they also pursue it or even that they desire it. All that is required is that these other persons regard the object with a favorable attitude. We need not, of course, presume that there is some single scale of values across a society. An object deemed good may be so regarded only within a circumscribed segment of society. For example, despite Smith's appeals to a seemingly universal admiration for the great, it is just as likely that working persons might have contempt for the wealthy or powerful and circumscribe their ambitions to the objects deemed good or respectable among fellow workers and neighbors.

At this point, the suggestion is that ambition is the pursuit of an intersubjectively valued object. Of course, there are many such objects and an agent's pursuit of them is not always ambitious. A beautiful but rare coin may be desired and pursued by a collector, and other coin enthusiasts may value that coin as well. But it is not clear that the pursuit of the coin exemplifies ambition. The problem does not necessarily lie, in this case, with the object pursued, though there exist more suitable objects to illustrate our subject: a new home, for example, or a new car, a higher salary, a position at a prestigious university. Yet there is a difference between desiring a new home and having an ambition for a new home. That one desires a new home and even takes active steps to secure a new home need not entail that one is ambitious for a new home. To say

that one is ambitious for a new home is to say something about the reasons why the new home is desired and pursued.

So what sort of reason is necessary for ambition? One of the lessons of Adam Smith's account is that it helps us to see how the desire for a particular convenience or object is not necessarily to be understood only in terms of wanting that thing. A second lesson rests in Smith's contention that the desire for some object is related to the agent's belief regarding the public perception of the attainment of the object. The ambitious person does not simply want a new home but wants a house that will impress others (colleagues at work, relatives, neighbors, or even anonymous persons). The young professor does not simply want to teach at an excellent institution but at an institution that is recognized or known to be excellent. So, we may surmise, a pursuit is ambitious in so far as one reason for the pursuit relates to what the agent believes that others will believe about him if the agent attains the object of the pursuit. The reasons for the pursuit must relate to what others will think if one attains the item pursued. In this context, it is important that there is a public, for the ambitious person is not attempting to impress one person in isolation from all others (or if the ambitious person is trying to impress *one* person, then this is done only in order to draw the attention of others). Second, there is an implicit connection, perhaps hardly needing mention, between the good that is sought and what others will think: if one attains what others regard as good, then the agent presumes that he too will be regarded positively *at least with regard to the attainment of the object*. It is crucial that the agent believes that he will be regarded positively, at least with regard to attaining the object. This belief need not include any corollary belief that the public will regard the agent, in general, in a positive light. In other words, an ambitious person may discern only that the public will regard him positively in relation to attaining a certain object or status; yet this same individual may also



admit that the public may not regard him, on the whole, in a positive light. Thus, the agent's belief about public regard is fully consistent with the public reacting with such envy that they do not regard the agent in any positive light.

This preliminary account requires further elaboration. In particular we need to distinguish the ambitious person from the person who simply enjoys attention. That someone pursues the attention of others does not make the pursuit ambitious. Consider this example, somewhat illustrative of a small town: a retired gentleman pursues his own election to a local government body. Few people stand for election; many elections have but one candidate. Nonetheless, the gentleman believes this body performs a valuable service, as do others in the community. However, this man also relishes attention: He likes to be in front of crowds, wants people to enjoy his jokes, and hopes that his interventions will be regarded, at least on some occasions, as wise. But the fellow does not seem ambitious!

How might we distinguish between the person who merely pursues attention from the person who is ambitious? We might note, first of all, that persons who seek attention do not do so in general, but this is not obviously so. A more significant element of distinction is that the person who seeks attention *wants attention* but the person who is ambitious *wants attention for what he does, achieves, or produces*. The person who clamors for attention desires attention rather than attention for attaining this object. This consideration also suggests that the ambitious person, who seeks recognition for attaining some object or status, is striving for something that is not just favorably valued but scarce. This point connects with the idea, note above, that ambition is often paired with passions such as avarice, passions which suggest a competitive element with regard to some good. Thus some of the typical ends of the ambitious are things such as wealth or status.

Finally, one of the other elements of ambition not so far noted is that ambition is not a discrete desire, satisfied and quenched. Adam Ferguson contends that ambition is a “settled desire” (*Institutes*, 77) and by this he means not simply that it is occasioned but that it is a disposition to desire. Montaigne’s concerns further illuminate this topic: ambition is not satiable for it is not so much the desire for some good as it is the desire for the public acclaim that comes with that good. So the desire for public recognition must be easily transferable from one object to another.

The narrative set forth may be summarized as follows. An agent is ambitious when the agent is disposed to desire some object (rank, status, etc) the agent believes to be good and to pursue that object in measured ways because the agent:

believes that the public, or some subset of the public, also believes the object good;

believes that the public will recognize and have a favorable attitude towards the agent’s acquiring that object;

desires public recognition for acquiring the object;

and the object is generally regarded as scarce;<sup>xvii</sup>

and the desire for public recognition is not appreciably diminished by the realization of the good or the recognition.

This account offers one interpretation of the form of ambition that connects with public recognition. Perhaps there are other forms too. Our analysis suggests that an end may be sought ambitiously or unambitiously—it depends on how important the recognition is. This analysis

also implies that an ambitious pursuit need not require that one wants the end chiefly or primarily because of recognition. (In other words, this interpretation supports our resolution of Adam Smith's seeming inconsistency. As you may recall, he states that it is "chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind that we pursue riches," but he later suggests that only "half the labours of human life" are devoted to attaining stature or place.) Recognition may be one reason for pursuing an end but not the only or primary one. This conclusion is also consistent with the common sense notion that ambition is a matter of degree. Those whom we condemn as ambitious may place too great an emphasis on recognition, too little on the end or the deed. It is an old story, yet it is often hard to remember.

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<sup>i</sup> Perhaps something similar is occurring in a recent biography of Chester Carlson, the man who invented the electronic copiers. According to his biographer, David Owen, Carlson had the ambition “to die a poor man.” (WSJ, August 6, 2004).

<sup>ii</sup> A thesis set forth in the seventeenth century, including by John Milton (as Lovejoy recounts, 158). Mandeville will revisit this thesis in a more fundamental and radical way.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ethics*, IV, LVIII.

<sup>iv</sup> To be well-known is essential to fame, but not to honor or glory. Honor relates to rank or status, as in instances of social or political honor, and it also presupposes an appropriate respect, rather than fame or glory. To speak of “glory” is to speak of exaltation, a delight in accomplishments or merit. Fame, on the other hand, is renown and recognition by a public whose criteria for acknowledgement need not suggest respect or accomplishment.

<sup>v</sup> The capacity to be affected by others was also recognized by Montesquieu and although he, describes, as is well known, how morals and mores may bear distinct effects in differing societies, he rather strikingly portrays the First Eunuch, in the *Persian Letters*, as having sacrificed his “passions for the sake of ease and wealth” (65). No longer regarding himself as a man he asserts “my ambition, [is] the only passion left me” (66) and one which can be satisfied in the seraglio.

<sup>vi</sup> He writes, “That the chief interest of Ambition, Avarice, Corruption, and every sly insinuating Vice . . . .” *Charateristicks*, I, 109

<sup>vii</sup> Consider as well the essay “Of Commerce,” where Hume maintains that “avarice and industry, art and luxury” are the effective motivations of society” (263).

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<sup>viii</sup> “That quick march of the spirits, which takes a man from himself, and chiefly gives satisfaction, does in the end exhaust the mind, and requires some intervals of repose, which, though agreeable for a moment, yet, if prolonged, beget a languor and lethargy, that destroys all enjoyment. . . . In times when industry and the arts flourish, men are kept in perpetual occupation, and enjoy, as their rewards, the occupation itself, as well as those pleasures which are the fruit of their labour” (“Of Refinement in the Arts” 270).

<sup>ix</sup> Smith flatters Rousseau’s style of writing and adds, “It is by the help of this style, together with a little philosophical chemistry, that the principles and ideas of the profligate Mandeville seem in him to have all the purity and sublimity of the morals of Plato, and to be only the true spirit of a republican carried a little too far” (251).

<sup>x</sup> As noted above, in the penultimate paragraph of the second *Discourse*, Rousseau writes: “Savage man breathes only tranquility and liberty; he wants simply to live and rest easy; and not even the unperturbed tranquillity of the Stoic approaches his profound indifference for any other objects. On the other hand, the citizen is always active and in a sweat, always agitated, and unceasingly tormenting himself in order to seek still more laborious occupations” (80).

<sup>xi</sup> Indeed, there are various avenues along which one may endeavour to better one’s condition. For Smith, as for Adam Ferguson (1995: 12-13, 172-5; 1792: 1, I.III.viii), such a desire includes moral as well as material development, though the ‘most vulgar and the most obvious’ method is ‘An augmentation of fortune’ (WN, II.iii.28: 341).

<sup>xii</sup> Smith also contends that ambition for power and wealth ‘keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind’ and in this way we have created ‘cities and commonwealths’ (TMS, IV.i.10: 183). Statements such as these remain difficult to reconcile with Smith’s views in the WN that the production of wealth demands prudence and industry. Perhaps this statement, and others like it, reflects an ‘early inadequate expression’ of views on commercial motivation, opinions from which Smith gradually retreats (Fleischacker 2004: 112).

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<sup>xiii</sup> Nonetheless, it remains true for Smith that the guiding imaginative ideal of ambition, shared by rich and poor alike, focuses on status, rank, and wealth. This guiding ideal has its own corrupting power.

<sup>xiv</sup> Andy Warhol offers a similar observation: “Sometimes you fantasize that people who are really up there and rich and living it up have something you don’t have, that their things must be better than your things because they have more money than you. But they drink the same Cokes and eat the same hot dogs and wear the same ILGWU clothes and see the same TV shows and the same movies. Rich people can’t see a sillier version of *Truth or Consequences*, or a scarier version of *The Exorcist*! You can get just as revolted as they can—you can have the same nightmares. All of this is really American.” *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B (and Back Again)*, New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 101.

<sup>xv</sup> A distinction between objective realism and intersubjectivity may be found in Christine M. Korsgaard, “The Reasons We can Share: An Attack on the Distinction between Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Values,” in *Altruism*, 28.

<sup>xvi</sup> In the case in which the agent believes falsely that others value the object valued by the agent we would have a delusional form of ambition.

<sup>xvii</sup> That the object is “scarce” is analogous to economic scarcity, though not strictly so.