

# ScholarWorks@GSU

## Adam Smith's Circle of Ambition

Authors	Pearsall, Zakary
Citation	Pearsall, Zakary. "Adam Smith's Circle of Ambition." 2016. Thesis, Georgia State University. <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/8684274">https://doi.org/10.57709/8684274</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/8684274">https://doi.org/10.57709/8684274</a>
Download date	2026-05-20 03:56:17
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/11995">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/11995</a>

# ADAM SMITH'S CIRCLE OF AMBITION

by

ZAKARY D. PEARSALL

Under the Direction of Eric Entrican Wilson, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Adam Smith often thought to be an unequivocal advocate of capitalism based on unfettered self-interest. Against this caricature, I argue that his attitudes towards the commercial society are, in fact, more ambivalent. To ground this claim, I outline Smith's account of ambition, a passion responsible for the dynamism of commercial economies but deleterious to individual happiness, and focus on the rhetoric Smith deploys in his portraits of three ambitious characters: the poor man's son, the ambitious man, and the prudent man. Next, I challenge alternative interpretations. In particular, I contest Samuel Fleischacker's view that Smith no longer sees vainly motivated ambition as the driving force behind economic growth in commercial society by the time he writes the *Wealth of Nations* and, thus, is not meaningfully ambivalent. In the last section, I draw on recent work by Amelie Rorty to argue Smith's ambivalence towards commercial society is both appropriate and constructive.

INDEX WORDS: Adam Smith, Commercial Society, Ambition, Passions

ADAM SMITH'S CIRCLE OF AMBITION

by

ZAKARY D. PEARSALL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Science

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

Copyright by  
Zakary D. Pearsall  
2016

ADAM SMITH'S CIRCLE OF AMBITION

by

ZAKARY D. PEARSALL

Committee Chair: Eric Entrican Wilson

Committee: Christie Hartley

Sebastian Rand

Electron Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2016

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to thank Eric Wilson for his guidance, encouragement, and early deadlines. I am also grateful to Christie Hartley and Sebastian Rand for their helpful suggestions and pointed questions. Thank you to Scott Collison, Akshay Ganesh, and my fellow graduate students for their friendship, camaraderie, and stimulating conversation over the past two years. Finally, I am grateful to Sydney Pullen for her patience, support, and feedback on several drafts.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>IV</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2 WHY AMBITION?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>2.1 THE ORIGIN OF AMBITION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2.2 AMBITION AND HAPPINESS</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>3 SMITH'S AMBITIOUS CHARACTERS</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>3.1 THE AMBITIOUS MAN</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>3.2 THE POOR MAN'S SON</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>3.3 THE PRUDENT MAN</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>4 HOW DEEP IS SMITH'S CONCERN?</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>5 MAKING SENSE OF AMBIVALENCE</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>6 CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>35</b>

*So if the mind is to have the possibility of being calm, it must not be tossed about nor... exhausted by doing things too ambitious for its powers.*

Seneca<sup>1</sup>

*But beware! The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.*

John Maynard Keynes<sup>2</sup>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Adam Smith is often thought to be a wholehearted proponent of capitalism based on self-interest by both friends and foes of his economic theory. However, as recent scholars have noted, Smith also harbored reservations about the moral and psychological effects of commerce.<sup>3</sup> This thesis aims to shed light on Smith's complex attitude towards commercial society by focusing on his account of an unruly passion: ambition. I contend that Smith is deeply troubled by the consequences of particular forms of ambition fostered by commercial society. Further, his reservations are not fully mitigated by the positive unintended consequences of this passion (i.e. material prosperity). Instead, Smith's account of ambition suggests that he harbors genuine ambivalence towards the emerging commercial society of his time.

If Smith is, in fact, ambivalent toward the economic and social order so closely tied to his name, is this a sign of inconsistency, incoherence, or sloppy thinking? In my view, it is not.

---

<sup>1</sup> "On Anger," in *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. John M Cooper and J.F. Precope (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), III. 6.3.

<sup>2</sup> "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren," *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Norton, 1963), 365.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Fleischacker *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Charles Griswold *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ryan Hanley *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Dennis Rasmussen *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008).

Unwilling to dismiss both the legitimate problems and immense benefits of commercial society, Smith emerges as an honest pragmatic philosopher and social scientist. Even more, his struggle with ambivalence is productive and contributes to the nuance and depth of views. Finally, Smith's worries about ambition in commercial society are still salient for those of us living in contemporary capitalist societies, and his continued uneasiness suggests that we should likewise struggle to ameliorate, rather than complacently accept, commercial society's seemingly endemic problems.

In the first section, I outline Smith's basic view of ambition, set up the conflict between commercial ambition and happiness, and argue that Smith's account of ambition is particularly intriguing both historically and in relation to his philosophy as a whole. Next, I consider what Smith's portraits of ambitious characters (e.g. "the poor man's son," "the ambitious man," "the prudent man") tell us about his attitudes towards commercial society. Then, I consider how commentators have tried to make sense of Smith's conflicting attitudes towards commercial society. In particular, I challenge Samuel Fleischacker's view that Smith no longer sees vainly motivated ambition as the driving force behind economic growth in commercial society by the time he writes the *Wealth of Nations*. In the last section, I draw on recent work by Amelie Rorty to argue Smith's ambivalence towards commercial society is appropriate and constructive, not inconsistent, lazy, or simply confused.

## **2 WHY AMBITION?**

Smith's views on the causes and effects of ambition are complex, varied, and deeply intertwined with moral philosophy and economic theory. On the one hand, he describes ambition as the cause of "tumult and bustle...rapine and injustice" (TMS. I.iii.2.8). On the other

hand, Smith praises ambition as a passion that is “always admired” when properly constrained (TMS III.6.7). Parsing these divergent assessments is essential to understanding the implications of Smith’s account of ambition for commercial society. Further, Smith’s views of ambitions – unlike the related concepts of self-interest and self-love – are under-explored in the scholarly literature, despite frequent reference to ambition in key passages of both *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. For instance, he identifies ambition as the motivating passion behind both the famous social-climbing poor man’s son (TMS IV.I.4) and the American Continental Congress’ decision to break with the British Crown (WN IV.vii.c.75). By gaining a firmer grasp of Smith’s underlying account of ambition, we can illuminate such passages as well as clarify the relationship between this passion and Smith’s attitudes towards commercial society.

Additionally, focusing on ambition, connects Smith to the rich tradition in modern philosophy that attempted to discover the origins and analyze the effects of the passions. In particular, tying Smith to this history highlights the distinctly commercial hue of his account. Smith’s emphasis on ambition as the passion propelling the drive for economic advantage and the acquisition of wealth sharply contrasts with earlier modern philosophers who stressed the link between ambition and desire for political power. Machiavelli evokes ambition to explain Cesare Borgia’s schemes of conquest, the “quarrels and tumults” of the barons, and the “treachery” of mercenaries.”<sup>4</sup> The Prince is advised to dull subjects’ ambitions by allowing them

---

<sup>4</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (New York: Cambridge University Press) 28, 36, and 43.

to retain their property and remain politically docile.<sup>5</sup> For Machiavelli, wealth counteracts ambition and is not, itself, the object of ambition. Likewise, Hobbes separates the “desire for riches,” or covetousness, from ambition defined as the “desire of office or precedence.”<sup>6</sup> Both passions resist reason and are the cause of crimes, but ambition inclines individuals to “public employment in counsel or magistracy,” that is, political power.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Hume claims that the passion of ambition moves political leaders to neglect the administration of justice and engage in violence.<sup>8</sup> Although Smith continues to use ambition to refer to the desire for political power and status (TMS III.iii.6), he shifts focus to the private pursuit of wealth: the desire to “better our condition.”

## 2.1 The Origin of Ambition

To better understand why Smith links ambition and commerce, we must look to ambition’s psychological foundations. Smith traces ambition to the human tendency to more easily sympathize with joy than with sorrow. Sympathy involves imagining oneself in another’s situation and entering into fellow-feeling with that person’s emotions. Human beings are naturally pleased by “mutual sympathy,” or concord, with the emotions of others and dismayed by conflicting sentiments (TMS I.i.2.1). Although mutual sympathy with sorrow is agreeable for Smith, actually entering into another’s sorrow can be painful, and “we always enter into it with

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>8</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 3.2.9.3-4.

reluctance” (TMS I.iii.1.9).<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, individuals are more inclined to fully sympathize with joy – which is pleasant in itself – than with sorrow.

Smith claims that this tendency to sympathize more fully with joy than with sorrow is responsible for the widespread admiration of the wealthy and powerful and, in turn, for ambition. We imagine the rich in the “delusive colors” of the “abstract idea of a perfect and happy state” and easily sympathize with the agreeable emotions we project onto them. Since human beings desire to be loved and praised by others, we become ambitious and are willing to undergo “toil,” “anxiety,” and “mortifications” in order to achieve the respect and admiration bestowed upon the rich (TMS I.iii.2.2). In other words, ambition is rooted in “being the object of attention and approbation,” that is, in the vice of vanity (TMS I.iii.2.1).<sup>10</sup>

This desire to be loved and admired by others, “the great object of our ambition” (TMS VI.ii.1.19), can be satisfied in a number different ways. One could treat others with kindness to gain their affection, since “kindness is the parent” of the kindness they will return to us (Ibid.). Additionally, we could draw forth the “attention and admiration of mankind” by distinguishing ourselves through war, or involvement in religious or political factions (TMS III.3.39-43). However, Smith maintains that most individuals in commercial society funnel their vanity

---

<sup>9</sup> This point is made in response to Hume who objects to the notion that sympathy always feeling good. Hume argues that if sympathy with sorrow was in itself pleasant, then a “hospital would be a more entertaining Place than a Ball” (TMS I.iii.1.9 FN 2).

<sup>10</sup> Hume gives a parallel explanation for the esteem we feel for the rich and powerful in *Treatise* II.II.V. Because “the minds of men are mirrors to one another,” we sympathize with the original pleasure the rich enjoy from their possessions and our added fellow-feeling with their pleasure increases the pleasures of wealth. Like Smith, Hume identifies this “third rebound” of pleasure, the admiration of others, as the “chief reason” that individuals desire to become wealthy themselves (Ibid.). Nonetheless, despite strong similarities in Smith and Hume’s psychological stories, the tone of their presentations is strikingly different. Hume describes this phenomenon in a matter-of-fact tone and approvingly refers to the disposition to admire the wealthy natural (Ibid.). Though Smith agrees that our esteem for the rich is “in some respects” natural, he laments the “moral corruption” it precipitates (I.iii.3.1).

primarily into “bettering their condition” and take this project to be the “great purpose of human life” (TMS I.iii.2.1). While the desire to better one’s condition does not necessarily entail acquiring great wealth, “an augmentation of fortune” is the method that the vast majority of individuals choose (WN II.iii.28). Smith takes a fairly dim view of this drive to accumulate wealth – the “most obvious” and “most vulgar” way of bettering one’s condition – but it is the primary expression of ambition in commercial societies (Ibid).

One reason Smith emphasizes commercial ambition is the fact that he is much more interested in the passions of the ordinary people that make up the “great mob of mankind” than previous writers. As Albert Hirschman notes, Smith allows that “ambition, the lust for power, and the desire for respect can all be satisfied by economic improvement” for most members of society.<sup>11</sup> Smith connects making money and ambition because he is focused on how non-elites jockey for status and distinction in society, rather than aristocrats’ quest for glory and honor. Most importantly, Smith places the most common form of ambition, bettering one’s condition through making money, at the foundation of commercial society and claims that “the uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition, [is] the principle from which public and national, and well as private opulence is originally derived” (WN II.iii.31). Thus, ambition appears to be the propelling mechanism behind industry, trade, and material prosperity in modern commercial societies.

---

<sup>11</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 110.

## 2.2 Ambition and Happiness

Why would Smith's account of ambition as the stimulus of economic growth call into question his wholehearted embrace of commercial society? In brief, he subscribes to a primarily Stoic, but also Epicurean-influenced, view that defines happiness as "tranquility and enjoyment" (TMS III.3.30) and claims that differences in social status (the object of ambition) are "superfluous" when it comes to "real happiness" (TMS I.iii.1.5) (TMS III.3.30). Accordingly, Smith asks "what can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience?" (TMS I.iii.1.7). It is exactly this notion of happiness as "tranquility of mind" that Hobbes rejects when he claims that "Life it selfe is but Motion, can never be without Desire, nor Feare, no more than without Sense," and redefines happiness as "*Continuall successe* in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say continuall prospering."<sup>12</sup> Smith largely agrees with the empirical claim that most of our lives involve constant motion and unsatisfied desire, but, unlike Hobbes, he is disturbed by this state of affairs. For Smith, wealth, power, and the praises of society are springs of anxiety that do little to make us happy despite widespread belief to the contrary.

Yet, Smith does not completely accept the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, and he criticizes the total denial of the "private, partial, and selfish affections" we feel for ourselves, friends, and the community at large (TMS VII.ii.1.42). Without the fire of the passions within us, we would be inadequately interested in how our lives and the lives of those dear to us actually turn out. It is also appropriate to be concerned with the opinions of others to some extent and the "chief

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), I.6. 29-30. Griswold also juxtaposes Smith's view of happiness with Hobbes' in *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment*, 219.

part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved” (TMS I.ii.5.2). We desire not only to be respected and praised but to be respectable and praiseworthy. The fulfilling the latter two desires contribute to true happiness: tranquility and enjoyment (TMS I.iii.3.2) (TMS II.2).

The esteem of equals, when we actually deserve it, contributes to true happiness, but the vast majority of citizens in commercial society mistakenly choose wealth acquisition as the road to admiration and perceived happiness (TMS I.ii.3.2). Thus, the objects of ambition are ultimately chimeras that inevitably fail to deliver on the initial promise of happiness that provokes the drive to “better our condition” through continuous labor. The passion Smith sees at the heart of commercial society does little to improve happiness and, in fact, is often portrayed as actively chipping away at our potential for happiness. With this in mind, I now turn to Smith’s character portraits of ambitious individuals to gain a more nuanced view of the effects of ambition, the purposes behind his rhetoric, and ultimately Smith’s attitudes toward commercial society.

### **3 SMITH’S AMBITIOUS CHARACTERS**

It is worthwhile to focus on the distinctly literary and affective aspects of Smith’s work to illuminate his philosophical positions. Unlike many contemporary moral philosophers, Smith is not writing exclusively for an audience of specialists. He aspires to actually improve the moral conduct of his readers, not just arrive at correct principles. Accordingly, Smith admires the rhetorical force of the Epicureans who emphasize that virtue is in an individual’s own interest.

Smith asks:

When men by their practice, and perhaps too by their maxims, manifestly show that the natural beauty of virtue is not like to have much effect upon them, how is it possible to

move them but by representing the folly of their conduct, and how much they themselves are in the end likely to suffer by it (TMS VII.ii.2.14)?

As a consequence of taking this sentiment to heart, Smith's highly rhetorical vignettes of ambitious individuals are critical for understanding his view of this irascible passion, and the moral takeaway he intends.

### **3.1 The Ambitious Man**

Smith's most extreme example of the toxic effects of unconstrained ambition is the "ambitious man" presented in the provocatively entitled chapter "Of the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by this disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition" (TMS I.iii.3.2). The ambitious man is a "candidate for fortune," meaning he is lower or middle class, who abandons the path of virtue in order to gain the admiration of his peers through superior wealth and power. Smith writes:

The ambitious man flatters himself that, in the splendid situation to which he advances, he will have so many means of commanding the respect and admiration of mankind, and will be enabled to act with such superior propriety and grace that the lustre of his future conduct will entirely cover, or efface, the foulness of the steps by which he arrived at that elevation (TMS I.iii.3.8).

Driven by ambition, this unfortunate individual commits grave injustices towards others, all the while hoping to avoid accountability for his actions by gaining sufficient wealth and power to render himself beyond reproach.

Yet, the ambitious man's quest for wealth and fame is quixotic, and his crimes inevitably come back to haunt him. More often than not, his unjust pursuits end in due punishment for the offender (TMS.I.iii.3.8). Even if the ambitious man is successful in becoming rich and powerful, Smith contends that he will be hard-pressed to find the happiness he so desperately desires. Smith claims that "amidst all the gaudy pomp of the most ostentatious greatness" the

ambitious man will “still secretly [be] pursued by the avenging furies of shame and remorse” and imagine “black and foul infamy fast pursuing him, at every moment ready to overtake him from behind” (TMS I.iii.3.9). In the end, even successful ambition leads to anxiety and inner turmoil that is anathema to the peace of mind (*ataraxia*) that Smith maintains is so vital for happiness.

Does this portrait of ambition call into question Smith’s wholehearted support for commercial society? Yes and no. In my view, the portrayal of the ambitious man serves more as a cautionary tale to impress moderation on individuals in commercial society than as a model of typical life in such a society. The great inequalities and greater social mobility in commercial societies will likely inflame ambition that harms others (unjust ambition), although this passion existed in previous societies as well. Also, most people in commercial societies are dependent upon the good opinion of their neighbors to thrive, and they will need to exhibit at least some degree of virtue in order to be successful (TMS I.iii.3.8). Unjust ambition does not appear to be beneficial to society as a whole, and can lead to “enormous crimes” and “civil war” (TMS *Ibid.*). Further, the economic system that Smith posits in his two books does not seem to rely on the pursuit of wealth and greatness by unjust individuals. In fact, unjust actions by ambitious merchants in the *Wealth of Nations* are unnecessary and detrimental to a healthy commercial society (WN IV.ii.c.9-10). If commercial society tends to produce such ambitious individuals, then Smith would have some reason to be cautious about fully endorsing it. However, he does not understand such unjust ambition to be the inevitable outcome or an essential feature of commercial society necessary for economic growth. Though the wanton passion of the ambitious man is atypical, the passage’s vivid rhetoric is meant to affectively move the reader

to reconsider the value of ambition. It is unlikely that many of us will resemble the ambitious man, but this character portrait does indicate, by means of a warning, that Smith is alarmed by unchecked ambition in commercial society.

### **3.2 The Poor Man's Son**

Another ambitious fellow, "the poor man's son," appears in Part IV of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this section Smith argues, contra Hume, that we do not admire the beauty of an object for its utility. Instead, we primarily admire an object for its "fitness" for the purpose for which it was intended (IV.1.1). For instance, I might admire and spend hundreds or thousands of dollars more for a particular brand of bicycle that only marginally adds to the speed, comfort, and reliability of the daily commute but is elegantly designed. Smith ties this psychological tendency of ours to consumerism and the immense human desire for "trinkets of frivolous utility" (TMS IV.1.6). We stuff our pockets with "little conveniences" and, literally and metaphorically, create new pockets to carry our "baubles," although the utility of such objects is not worth the burden they place on us (TMS IV.1.6).

This desire for frivolous material goods affects the poor man's son, "whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition," and he admires the beauty and fitness of the living conditions and lifestyle of the rich. He imagines riding in a carriage rather than walking on foot, how easy life would be with servants attending to his every need in a large palace, and dreams of the social status attached to wealth. The poor man's son envisions a life of mental tranquility free from strenuous physical work and decides to engage in continuous labor in the pursuit of wealth (TMS IV.1.7). However, his ambition causes him to feel "in the first month of application... 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” (TMS IV.1.8). This tragic individual sacrifices security and tranquility by “serving those he hates” and becoming “obsequious to those he despises” all in order to gain riches. At the end of his life, the poor man’s son “curses ambition” and regrets neglecting the pleasures of his youth. Alas, he sees power and wealth for what they are:

Enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniences to the body, consisting of springs the most nice and delicate, which must be kept in order with the most anxious attention, and which in spite of all our care are ready every moment to burst into pieces, and to crush in their ruins their unfortunate possessor (TMS Ibid.)

Ultimately, the pursuit of wealth and greatness – even when successful – does not prevent us from becoming unhappy and can make us even more miserable.

The poor man’s son vignette introduces a new source of ambition. Not only does he bring his wealth “into public view” and receive the admiration of the “great mob of mankind,” this upstart longs to possess the newest, most efficient, products that wind up being more hassle than they are worth. Foreshadowing frequent, and often banal, contemporary critiques of the demand for products like the Apple Watch, Smith captures the subtle interplay between the status afforded to us by conspicuous consumption and our innate admiration for the beauty and utility of well designed, efficient objects. Due to both of these factors, social status and our innate admiration, the desire for “conveniences and ornaments of building, dress, equipage, and household furniture, seem to have not limit or certain boundary” (WN I.xi.c.7). Moreover, commercial societies can meet this “endless” demand as the growing efficiency provided by division of labor produces ever more consumer goods (Ibid.). As a consequence, the desire for “frivolous objects” that comprises the “secret motive” behind our “most serious pursuits” is

exacerbated and intensified in commercial societies (TMS IV.I.7). Inequality will also persist in any prosperous commercial society, leaving ample motivation to seek wealth for the sake of social status (WN i.b.2). The fate of the poor man's son indicates that commercial ambition is often deleterious to individual happiness and suggests that Smith is ambivalent towards commercial society.

Nonetheless, the poor man's son's ambition, though motivated by a "deception" about the sources of happiness, has a remarkable unintended consequence: it "rouses and keeps in motion the industry of mankind," is responsible for "the sciences and arts that embellish human life," and turns "the rude forest of nature into agreeable and fertile plains."<sup>13</sup> Material prosperity follows from ambition and spreads even to the lowest ranks of society as the wealthy are led by an "invisible hand" to distribute the necessities of life to all (TMS IV.1.10).<sup>14</sup> In other words, tremendous collective benefits emerge from the individual tragedies of ambitious social climbers.

In contrast to the "ambitious man" of TMS I.iii.3, whose ambition has a negative effect on society, the ambition that drives that the poor man's son is the motivational engine that propels economic growth. The vanity that fuels the poor man's son's ambition is the same vanity that is behind the desire to better one's condition, the "end of half the labours of human life" (TMS I.ii.2.8). The emulation of the wealthy is not only the "great purpose of human life" (TMS I.iii.2.1) but also underlies the economic system that Smith correctly claims will

---

<sup>13</sup> The reference to "rude forests" and "agreeable plains" recalls Smith translation of a passage of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. Adam Smith "A Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* ed. by W.P.D Wightman and J.C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> This is one of only three references to an "invisible hand" in Smith's entire corpus.

dramatically increase material prosperity. It appears that an unhealthy mental deception about what truly makes human beings happy lies at the root of the commercial society that Smith advocates in the more famous of his two books. Smith's ambivalence is revealed in his description of the destructive effects of ambition on individuals and his simultaneous praise for ambition's collective benefits.

Further, Smith never suggests that the poor man's son acts unjustly towards others and, as such, he is not incompatible with a stable commercial society in the same manner as the ambitious man is with his unjust actions and occasional violence. The poor man's son will likely exhibit the middling virtues of "just, firm, and temperate conduct" that commercial societies tend to cultivate, since he relies on the good opinions of others (TMS I.iii.3.5). Nonetheless, like to the workers in the *Wealth of Nations* driven by "mutual emulation and the desire of greater gain" to "frequently... overwork themselves" for the sake of ending their days in "ease and plenty" (I.viii), he ends up inflicting self-harm. Smith understands this deleterious form of ambition as both compatible with and intimately tied to a robust commercial society.

Still, does Smith intend a genuine critique of commercial ambition in the poor man's son passage, does his rhetoric simply set up the dramatic conclusion that private vices have the capacity to unleash great public benefits? If the poor man's son reflects Smith's settled view, then we should find equally severe language elsewhere in his work – and we do. For instance, in TMS I.ii.2.7, Smith writes:

'Love,' says my Lord Rochfaucault, 'is commonly succeeded by ambition, but ambition is hardly ever succeeded by love.' That passion, when once it has got entire possession of the breast, will admit neither a rival nor a successor. To those who have been accustomed to the possession, or even to the hope of public admiration, all other pleasures sicken and decay.

In this passage, we see the power that ambition is liable to have on us and why the “desire to better our condition... comes with us from the womb and never leaves us till we go into the grave” (WN II.iii.28). Thus, Smith warns his readers (and the young students that attended the lectures that became *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) that:

There seems to be one way to continue in that virtuous resolution; and perhaps but one.

Never enter that play from whence so few have been able to return; never come within the circle of ambition; nor ever bring yourself into comparison with those masters of the earth who have already engrossed the attention of half of mankind before you (Ibid.).

This parallel depiction of ambition implies that the poor man’s son is not an anomaly in commercial society but is under the grip of a widespread and highly potent passion. Moreover, this direct and dire warning indicates that Smith intends a sincere critique of the moral and psychological effects of ambition. Because Smith is genuinely disturbed by commercial ambition but also sees it as a necessary condition of prosperity, his attitudes toward commercial society pull him in opposite directions.

### 3.3 The Prudent Man

Another indication of Smith’s unease towards commercial society is Part VI, “Of the Character of Virtue,” added to the sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this section, Smith introduces “the prudent man” who is an exemplar of ambition properly constrained. The prudent man is sincere, frugal, and industrious but is not anxious to risk a comfortable situation in order to become rich. He possesses “secure tranquility” and enjoys both leisure and the gradual improvement of his financial situation. Nonetheless, the prudent man is exceptionally dull and is not disposed to “general sociality,” benevolence, political engagement, or the superior virtues of individuals like Socrates or Voltaire (TMS VI.i.8-13). Although the prudent man provokes “a certain cold esteem,” he is not the object of our “ardent

love” or admiration (TMS VI.i.14). This is a decent but deficient ideal of prudence that Smith contrasts with superior prudence characterized by Aristotelian and Platonic virtue. Indeed, Smith relates this inferior prudence to Epicureanism in the pejorative sense of selfish, but calculated, hedonism (Ibid.).

Smith’s mixed assessment of the prudent man sharply contrasts with Hume’s unequivocal praise of Cleanthes, “a man of business and application,” in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.<sup>15</sup> For Smith, prudence and self-command are necessary to resist ambition’s pull for “new enterprises and adventures,” but exercising these virtues come with potential moral costs (TMS VI.i.12). Although the prudent man cares for his rank and reputation, he is unconcerned with the “vain splendor of successful ambition” that seduces the poor man’s son. By limiting his sympathy with the rich and powerful (a principle source of ambition), the prudent man gains the ability to be satisfied with “small accumulations” of wealth (Ibid.). Regrettably, the prudent man also has a stunted capacity for the virtues of benevolence, sociality, and magnanimity that rely on sympathy with others as well (TMS VI.i.9-15).<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Hume’s industrious Cleanthes is tranquil, happy, generous, and “the very life and soul of... conversation” at a social gathering.<sup>17</sup> For Hume, the pursuit of wealth in commercial society supports virtue and happiness, liberating us from the “monkish virtues” of

---

<sup>15</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983) EPM IX.i.1-3.

<sup>16</sup> In III.3.37, Smith argues that the virtue of self-command is often produced in situations that “weaken the principle of humanity.” If great self-command is necessary to resist ambition in commercial society, it is consistent for this virtue to limit our benevolence and sociality – virtues derived from our humanity. Elsewhere, Smith connects vanity, the motivation behind ambition, with humanity, politeness, and generosity (TMS VI.iii.43). Self-command and humanity are far from mutually exclusive, but different social arrangements will tend to produce different virtues and vices.

<sup>17</sup> Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals*, IX.i.2.

self-denial, humility and solitude.<sup>18</sup> For Smith, the moral consequences of commerce are much more ambiguous.

The prudent man is Smith's model for the average person in commercial society to avoid the follies of ambition, but this model forecloses the possibilities for "noble and great ambition" and limits the amiable virtues derived from humanity (TMS. VI.i.13). Some individuals in commercial society may be able to reach a higher standard, yet Smith is not optimistic about the bulk of mankind. The fact that Smith invokes the prudent man as a model for combating ambition, while admitting he does not embody the nobler virtues that Smith actively values, suggests that Smith is deeply troubled by the prevalence and deleterious effects of commercial ambition on individuals. The less-than-ideal prudent man is far from Smith's preferred model of virtue: the wise and virtuous man. Smith compromises in order to correct for the deficiencies of commercial society, but in doing so he reveals his continued ambivalence.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4 HOW DEEP IS SMITH'S CONCERN?

In the last section, I outlined the psychological origins of ambition and detailed how Smith's vivid character portraits reveal ambition to be both a powerful basis of anxiety and unhappiness for individuals as well as economic prosperity. If this is the case, then Smith would appear to harbor ambivalent attitudes toward the commercial society he is often thought to wholeheartedly champion. In recent works, Dennis Rasmussen and Samuel Fleischacker also recognize this tension between Smith's Stoic-influenced view of happiness and the passions

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., IX.i.3.

<sup>19</sup> Ryan Hanley argues that TMS VI was intended as a "remedy for the challenges that he [Smith] identified with the advent and progress of commercial society" in *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Despite much agreement between our views, Hanley is more optimistic about the prudent man and takes the poor man's son to be less of a "window" into life in commercial society (105).

enflamed by commercial society. However, both scholars fail to fully appreciate the depth of Smith's unease and, consequently, his genuinely ambivalent attitudes toward commercial society.

Unlike Rasmussen and Fleischacker, Charles Griswold more fully appreciates Smith's mixed assessment of life in commercial society. According to Griswold, the fact that the "unceasing work" of bettering our condition leaves us "constantly dissatisfied" is a "comic irony."<sup>20</sup> He claims that Smith perceives society as "governed by systematic self-deception about its own ends" and, therefore, is "inclined to private, though not necessarily public, unhappiness."<sup>21</sup> Griswold recognizes Smith's ambivalence, contends that commercial society will at best be one of "middling virtue," and, most significantly, claims that the *Wealth of Nations* ought to be "painted *within* the frame" of the deception about happiness found in the poor man's son passage.<sup>22</sup> Though Griswold does not emphasize ambition specifically, he recognizes that the drive to better one's condition causes widespread anxiety, internal discord, as well as vast economic benefits

In response to Griswold, Rasmussen argues that it is quite strange to claim that society is happy when individual citizens are anxious and unhappy.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Griswold fails to adequately explain Smith's positive attitudes towards commercial society. To reconcile this paradox, Rasmussen contends that commercial society is vindicated by its ability to reduce dependence on others, such as feudal landlords, and provide for greater liberty and security

---

<sup>20</sup> Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment*, 222.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 263

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>23</sup> Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society*, 134.

than pre-commercial societies (WN III.iv.4).<sup>24</sup> Commercial society also tends to bring about good government and alleviates the misery of poverty. Even though wealth does not guarantee happiness, and the relentless pursuit of wealth hinder happiness, commercial society reduces other sources of unhappiness – namely dependence, poverty, and political oppression.<sup>25</sup>

Rasmussen takes Smith's sympathy with Rousseau's critique of commercial society seriously, including what he calls "the pursuit of happiness critique" that overlaps with much of my account of ambition in the previous section. Yet, Rasmussen maintains that "while the common portrayal of Smith as an unabashed apostle of laissez-faire capitalism is surely a caricature, viewing him as anything but an advocate of commercial society requires a willful disregard for the substance of his thought."<sup>26</sup> Certainly, Rasmussen is correct to appeal to these beneficial features to make sense of Smith's positive assessments commercial society. It is no accident that Smith's name is closely linked to commerce in the public imagination.

Nevertheless, Rasmussen's claim that Smith's defense of commercial society "rests on a kind of cost-benefit analysis" is too crude. Smith may, in the end, be a cautious advocate of commercial society, but the view that he simply adds up the positive and negative effects of commercial society compared to its rivals obfuscates the continuing tensions and lack of resolution that persists in Smith's work.

Smith is committed to improving the bleak social conditions of the poor through commerce, but he is also concerned that the pursuit of wealth makes us unhappy in a heavily moralized sense of happiness. Like many ancient moralists, Smith holds that living a morally

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 137-157

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 91.

praiseworthy life and pursuing the correct ends is a necessary condition for real happiness. The anxiety produced by ambition in commercial society does not just result in individuals that are psychologically off-kilter; it is the product of a society that generates corrupted values. Because the obstruction of true happiness that comes with living a morally praiseworthy life and the relief of suffering (major costs and benefits of commercial society) are incongruous, they resist easy adjudication by means of a cost-benefit analysis as proposed by Rasmussen. Furthermore, as I argue in this paper's final section, Smith's unresolved ambivalence need not be regretted as it enriches and adds nuance to his account of life in commercial society.

Additionally, Rasmussen does not sufficiently recognize how the prudent man reflects Smith's deep worries about commercial ambition and happiness. Rasmussen claims that "people in commercial society will tend to exhibit the virtues of the prudent man for most people in this kind of society, most of the time, these virtues are the surest path to success."<sup>27</sup> However, Rasmussen fails to appreciate the extent to which the prudent man is a *normative* rather than *descriptive* model of life in commercial society. Although most people will need to exhibit at least some degree of virtue to be financially successful (TMS I.iii.3.8), the prudent man also enjoys "secure tranquility" and has "no anxiety to change a comfortable situation" (TMS Vi.11). These traits do not describe a society where the "great mob of mankind" worships wealth (TMS I.iii.3.2), "vanity" is the purpose of "all the toil and bustle in the world" (TMS I.iii.2.1), and a deception rouses the "continual industry of mankind" not just industry of a few exceptionally vain individuals (TMS IV.1.9). Moreover, while Rasmussen contrasts the virtue of

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 121.

the prudent man with “superior prudence,” he does not discuss the prudent man’s deficiencies in regard to more common virtues of benevolence, sociality, and civic engagement.<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, he does not identify the degree to which the prudent man is a compromised normative ideal that expresses Smith’s reservations towards commercial society. Despite stressing Smith’s agreement with Rousseau, Rasmussen insufficiently appreciates Smith’s ambivalence towards commercial society.

Samuel Fleischacker offers a more far-reaching objection to my view. He rejects Griswold’s position that the commercial economy is predicated on a “large scale mistake in our understanding of happiness.”<sup>29</sup> Instead, Fleischacker claims that Smith’s settled view in the *Wealth of Nations* does not posit vanity as the driving force behind economic growth. Hence, the self-destructive pursuit of wealth, motivated by vanity, is unnecessary for a dynamic commercial society to flourish. Smith could both wholeheartedly embrace commercial society and criticize the unconstrained pursuit of wealth. If this is right, then Smith is alert to the problems of commercial society but not ambivalent in any meaningful sense.

First, Fleischacker contends that if Smith, in fact, sees the pursuit of wealth as encouraging moral corruption and unhappiness, then a “very serious moral gap” would remain between Smith’s moral and economic views.<sup>30</sup> However, like Rasmussen, Fleischacker makes strong arguments for the positive effects Smith observes in commercial society, including

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>29</sup> Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment*, 224. Fleischacker *On Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

raising the standard of living of the worst off<sup>31</sup> (WN I.viii.36), promoting international peace (via free trade), reducing worker's dependence on their superiors (WN III.iv.4), and encouraging the rule of law.<sup>32</sup> We can make sense of Smith's harsh assessment of the unrelenting pursuit of wealth, and his praise for commercial society, by appreciating these positive effects.

Additionally, Fleischacker states that if Smith is as deeply troubled by the pursuit of wealth as the poor man's son passage suggests, then he should have criticized commercial society from a moral perspective and recommended institutions to "correct for the delusion it fosters." After all, Smith does propose universal public education to mitigate the alienating effects of the division of labor (another highly regrettable feature of commercial society).<sup>33</sup> Yet, Smith's discussion of the prudent man, added to the Sixth edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, shows that Smith is concerned with limiting the delusion that great wealth will lead to happiness to some extent. Still, if the liberating features of commercial society rest on this delusion, then only limited corrections may be possible without undercutting those features.

Though the *Wealth of Nations* does not emphasize vanity as the source of economic prosperity to the same degree as *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, this motivation is still present. For example, Smith describes how the aristocracy of Europe,

Having sold their birthright, not like Esau for a mess of pottage in time of hunger and necessity, but in the wantonness of plenty, for trinkets and baubles, fitter to be the playthings of children than the serious pursuits of men, they became as insignificant as any substantial burgher or tradesman in a city (WN III.iv.15)

---

<sup>31</sup> Of course, this benefit only matters if external good have some influence on happiness. The extreme Stoicism of the end of TMS IV.1.10, "in ease of body and peace of mind... the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for," calls this point into question. Nonetheless, even the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* admits that such extreme Stoicism is "beyond the reach of human nature," and he allows external goods do have some influence on happiness (I.iii.3).

<sup>32</sup> Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

This passage details how our desire for consumer goods has the power to influence the transition from feudal to commercial society, an economic and social revolution, with identical language (baubles and trinkets!) as TMS IV.1.6. This transition is also influenced by the other source of ambition that drives the poor man's son: the need to stand out and be admired. The landlords desire "buckles" and other elegant contrivances because, unlike land, "no other human creature was to have any share of them" (WN III.iv.10).<sup>34</sup> For Smith, vanity and ambition not only maintain commercial society, but, in part, *initiated* this economic order. Furthermore, the lower ranks of society in the *Wealth of Nations* are also described as driven by "mutual emulation and the desire of greater gain" to "frequently... overwork themselves" for the sake of ending their days in "ease and plenty" (I.viii). Contra Fleischacker, Smith still identifies vanity, the chief source of ambition in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as a key incentive to bettering our condition in the *Wealth of Nations*.

Fleischacker bears the additional burden of explaining why Smith left the poor man's son passage unaltered throughout the *five* editions of the book published after the *Wealth of Nations*. Fleischacker conjectures that Smith might have left this passage intact because it is "a beautiful piece of writing."<sup>35</sup> As further evidence, he identifies Smith's support for "premiums and other encouragements" for industry later in the passage as a sign that Smith did not give the poor man's son passage careful attention during his revisions, since such interventionist economic policies conflict with Smith's mature views in the *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>36</sup> Yet, the actual

---

<sup>34</sup> The connection between vanity and the ambition for wealth is also shown in WN I.xi.c.31: "with the greater part of rich people, the chief enjoyment of riches consists in the parade of riches, which in their eyes is never so complete as when they appear to possess those decisive marks of opulence which nobody can possess but themselves."

<sup>35</sup> Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

economic policy Smith advocates does little to change the overall point of this section, that the “love of system,” rather than benevolence, often is the motive behind successful government reforms. It is understandable that he would not alter this section for a fairly minor detail. In contrast, the poor man’s son passage is one of the most striking in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and combating ambition is a prominent theme in Smith’s revisions. I doubt Smith would leave this passage unchanged if he doubted the validity of its conclusions.

Fleischacker must also account for other unchanged passages in the final edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, namely, I.ii.2.1 where Smith asks

From whence, then, arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our conditions?

And answers

To be observed, to be attend to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it. It is vanity, not ease, or the pleasure, which interests us.

Against Fleischacker’s claim that “vanity consists in the pursuit of outstanding ‘wealth and greatness,’ not in the ordinary effort to ‘better one’s condition’,”<sup>37</sup> this passage explicitly identifies bettering one’s condition with vanity throughout society. According to TMS I.ii.2, vanity is the “origin of ambition,” and bettering our condition is the principal expression of ambition in commercial societies.

In the Sixth edition, Smith builds off TMS I.ii.2 in a new chapter, TMS I.ii.3, dedicated to the “corruption” of the moral sentiments resulting from admiration of the rich and neglect of the the poor. Fleischacker cites the fact that Smith does not emphasize the positive economic

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 112.

effects of ambition in this chapter as evidence that unhealthy ambition is no longer necessary for economic progress.<sup>38</sup> But, in my view, this addition should be read in light of the chapter immediately preceding it that explains the origin of ambition and the desire to better our conditions in terms of vanity. Though the “ambitious man” of TMS I.ii.3 exhibits more than a common desire to simply better his condition, he is pulled by the same motivational strings when he chooses the path of “proud ambition and ostentatious avidity” to be the object of the masses’ approbation (TMS I.iii.3.2). For Smith, the ambitious man’s extreme folly amplifies the warning against excessive and vain ambition, equated with bettering our condition, a chapter earlier. This new chapter, added 15 years after the *Wealth of Nations*, signals Smith’s deepening alarm over the pursuit of wealth. In a characteristically harsh passage, he argues:

Many a poor man places his glory in being thought rich, without considering that the duties (if one may call such follies by so very venerable a name) which that reputation imposes upon him, must soon reduce him to beggary, and render his situation still more unlike that of those whom he admires and imitates, than it had been originally (TMS I.iii.3.7).

This poor man’s ambition is an extension of the vain ambition described a chapter earlier as well as the ambition of the poor man’s son. In the additions to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith renews his distaste and moral concern for the pursuit of wealth and greatness. Further, he offers no indication that ambition ceases to underpin economic prosperity.

Ultimately, Fleischacker fails to demonstrate that Smith abandoned his earlier position that economic progress is largely predicated on vain ambition for wealth. Smith preserves the view that commercial society is based on a “deception” about the source of happiness, and he becomes increasingly concerned about the effects of this deception in the last edition of *The*

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

*Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Moreover, the benefits of commercial society to an extent depend on, and thus are inseparable from, the noxious effects of ambition. This combination of attitudes suggests that Smith is genuinely uneasy, and his assessments of commercial society pull him in opposite directions.

## 5 MAKING SENSE OF AMBIVALENCE

So far, I have argued that Smith's conflicting evaluative attitudes toward commercial society are revealed in the rhetoric used to describe his ambitious characters. To complete this argument, I now clarify the concept of ambivalence using recent work by Amelie Rorty who contends that ambivalence can, at times, be both *appropriate* and *constructive*. If Smith's ambivalence is epistemically well-grounded (appropriate) rather than lazily inconsistent, then there is less motivation to insist that he changed his mind by the time he wrote the *Wealth of Nations* and revised the *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Contra Fleischacker, we could "make sense" of why Smith "urge[s] us throughout TMS to see the pursuit of wealth as morally corrupting and conducive to unhappiness, but also applaud[s] a social system that depends upon, and encourages, that very pursuit."<sup>39</sup> Further, in my view, Smith's ambivalence is not only well-grounded but constructive and a source of the nuance and depth in his account of life in commercial society.

How should we define ambivalence? Following Rorty, I understand a person to be ambivalent if she has seemingly unresolvable tensions or conflicting attitudes towards a specific object.<sup>40</sup> I may be ambivalent in situations where action is at stake (e.g. should I have children

---

<sup>39</sup> Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations*, 104.

<sup>40</sup> Amelie Rorty, "A Plea for Ambivalence," *Oxford Handbook of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 429.

or not?) or when attitudes alone conflict (e.g. is the *Force Awakens* a towering cinematic achievement or merely a lazy remake of *A New Hope*?). Furthermore, ambivalence involves more than confusion over how to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of discrete options: it involves conflicting attitudes toward the *same* object or state of affairs in this case commercial society.<sup>41</sup> Smith does not merely consider the virtues and vices of commercial society. Instead, the cause of seemingly endemic unhappiness – the ambition for ever greater wealth – is itself the propelling force that undermines other sources of misery such as dependence, poverty, and political oppression. Smith expresses genuine ambivalence toward commercial ambition and the social and economic structure that supports and relies on this passion.

We often associate ambivalence with inconsistency, murky reasoning, and *akrasia*, and Smith's views have not infrequently appeared to be problematically inconsistent to scholars of his work. In the nineteenth century, the so called "Adam Smith Problem" questioned the compatibility between his views of human motivation in his two great works. Today, most commentators agree that the Adam Smith Problem is a pseudo-problem. But if Smith did see human relations as principally governed by altruism and sympathy (in the ordinary sense) in the *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and by egoism and self-interest in the *Wealth of Nations*, an unfortunate contradiction would exist. He would be arguing for "a" and "~a" at the same time. This rather schizophrenic Smith could be thought to be ambivalent about the nature of human motivation, but he surely would not be *appropriately* ambivalent.

When, then, is ambivalence appropriate? Rorty defines the conditions of appropriate ambivalence as follows,

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 431.

- (1) a person believes that both of at least two apparently conflicting thick descriptions, *d* and *d'*, or her situation are well grounded or well founded in context *s*; and
- (2) they are reasonably well-grounded and well-founded; and
- (3) *p* is ambivalent about which description should be salient in dominating her attention in *s*; and
- (4) *p* reasonably believes that she cannot – and should not – discard or eradicate her perceptions of her opinions; she believes that the considerations that support them should remain in the space of her reasons.<sup>42</sup>

Smith's positive and negative descriptions of life in commercial society are certainly "thick," meaning they include "evaluative intentions" and attitudes, not just bare bones description.<sup>43</sup>

Both attitudes towards commercial society appear epistemically well-grounded. Ambition in the context of commercial society often inhibits the tranquility that comes with pursuing worthwhile ends and redirects individuals' attention to frivolous financial accumulation.

Nonetheless, ambition creates the material prosperity that contributes to meeting basic needs that are in no way frivolous. Unlike the potential conflict in the Adam Smith Problem, the tension between Smith's neo-Stoic concerns about ambition and true happiness and his economic prescriptions does not involve sloppy thinking or an overlooked contradiction, though his concerns do entail conflict in his overall assessment of commercial society. This higher-level tension emerges from principled and well-grounded lower-level reasons. Smith's mixed attitudes need not make his work less valuable or perceptive.

Smith refuses to discard his distaste for ambition and its more deleterious moral and psychological effects from the relevant space of reasons when he considers and, in the end, advocates for institutions that can maximize the benefits of commercial society. To wholeheartedly embrace commercial society would do violence to many of his deeply held

---

<sup>42</sup> Rorty "A Plea for Ambivalence," 434.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

convictions, including the view that an abundance of material goods does not lead to happiness and that commercial ambition relies on a corruption of the moral sentiments. Even more, Smith recognizes that ambition in commercial societies, animated by great inequality, widely available consumer goods, and a greater social mobility, actively produces dissatisfaction and internal disturbance.

Nevertheless, Smith is not solely concerned with morality or happiness in the form of tranquility. He is also troubled by poverty and suffering caused by material deprivation. As noted on the very first page of the *Wealth of Nations*, commercial society liberates many citizens from hunger, disease, and the need to commit infanticide or neglect the care of elders out of financial necessity. Smith's views of morality, happiness, and the misguided pursuit of wealth do not blind him to abject suffering. Thus, wholeheartedly condemning commercial society would violate his deeply held concern for the poor. While Smith acknowledges commercial society's superiority to contemporary alternatives, he insists that we see its severe shortcomings for what they are. In other words, Smith preserves both assessments of commercial society in his field of reasons and values, leaving the question of commercial society's ultimate desirability on the table.

Given Smith's normative commitments and empirical observations, his ambivalence appears appropriate and perhaps inescapable. However, we need not lament this state of affairs. First, ambivalence, though messy, can sometimes be the most honest response to a phenomenon and allow for the preservation of one's integrity. Second, the struggle to resolve ambivalence can operate as catalyst to constructively reexamine the context of choice. By attempting to preserve epistemically appropriate opposing attitudes, we can use what Rorty

calls *imaginative strategies* to deepen our analysis of the situation we confront.<sup>44</sup> In my view, Smith's account of life in commercial society makes use of such imaginative strategies thus deepening his analysis.

One such strategy involves shifting perspectives in an attempt to reframe the relevant boundaries of the issue at hand.<sup>45</sup> For instance, Smith takes on no less than four separate perspectives in the few short pages that describes the case of the poor man's son. In everyday non-reflective life, the objects of ambition appear "beautiful and noble" as we imagine the "harmonious movement of the system" and the pleasures of wealth and power (TMS IV.1.9). Smith understands this perspective to be natural and does not solely condemn the love of system or attention to social status. In fact, the love of system leads to public-spiritedness and good governance (TMS.IV.11), and concern for one's rank comprises part of the virtue of prudence (TMS.VI.14).<sup>46</sup> Yet, Smith also considers the perspective of man at the end of his life afflicted by the "languor of disease" who "curses ambition" and regrets missing out on the real satisfaction of life for the sake of the pursuit of wealth (TMS IV.8). Next, Smith asks his reader to imagine the value of wealth and "elegant contrivances" from the perspective of an individual living alone on a desolate island who regards wealth with the "same curiosity of a tooth-pick [or] an ear-picker" (Ibid.). With the removal of the status associated with wealth, the great pull of ambition fades away.

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 437.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 436, 438.

<sup>46</sup> See Stephen Darwall "Smith's Ambivalence about Honor," in *Honor, History, and Relationship: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) for an excellent account of Smith's ambivalence towards honor, rank, social status.

Finally, Smith looks at our vain pursuit of wealth and power from the standpoint of Providence and the world as a whole. From this perspective, commercial ambition appears well worth its cost and is responsible for redoubling the earth's natural fertility, growing prosperous cities, and distributing the necessities of life to the poor members of society (TMS IV.1.10). It is from this perspective that Smith chooses to advocate for commercial society, and the *Wealth of Nations* offers advice about institutional designs that exploit ambition. By abstracting from the anxious individualized experiences of the race for wealth, Smith appeals to our love of system and the beauty of the economic system as whole. This imaginative strategy allows Smith to support commercial society while retaining his conflicting attitudes in his space of reasons and values, thus simultaneously offering a critique and justification for commercial society.

Smith's struggle to preserve his conflicting assessments prompts his use of another imaginative strategy described by Rorty – that of *compromising* and *compensating* for the flaws of commercial society.<sup>47</sup> In the the final edition of the *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith most fully develops his prescriptive moral views and seeks to constrain commercial ambition. The two major additions, a chapter on the admiration of the wealthy and great, as well as Part VI on “the character of virtue,” are an attempt to reconcile Smith's ambivalence without denying the validity of his opposing attitudes.

The target audience of TMS I.iii.3 is young potential social-climbers, who are tempted by great wealth and the potential for social mobility in commercial society. This audience would sympathize with the ambitious man's desire to be the object of “respect and admiration” (TMS I.iii.3.8). Yet, his unfortunate fate serves as a warning about the destructive consequences for

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 436.

their individual happiness if ambition is allowed to take control. Smith's pathos and emotionally charged rhetoric in the chapter show that he intends not to just write descriptive moral philosophy but to persuade readers to avoid falling into the traps of commercial society. Smith stokes the resentment of the lower classes towards the wealthy "men of fashion" who are born into wealth and praised for "external graces, and frivolous accomplishments" (TMS I.iii.3.6). He redirects the sentiments of his audience, the "middling and inferior stations," towards viewing their own vain ambitions in the same light as the corrupt aristocracy. Driven by continued ambivalence over subsequent editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith offers his normative moral philosophy as an intervention that *compensates* for the flaws of commercial society. Though ambition is needed to prop up the economy, Smith can lessen, but not eliminate, the conflict between his opposed attitudes by limiting the most toxic forms of ambition.

In Part VI of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith attempts to *compromise* his opposing assessments of commercial society with his account of prudence, a virtue perhaps capable of resisting gross commercial ambition. Like I.iii.3, this new Part ties one's true self-interest to the slow steady accumulation of wealth, as well as to just and temperate conduct. While the prudent man pales in comparison to the higher prudence of the wise and virtuous man, his inferior prudence nevertheless allows him to live a decent, less anxious existence, despite not meeting Smith's high standards of benevolence and magnanimity. Although the virtue of prudence may ultimately be insufficient to combat the vain pursuit of wealth, Smith's account shows what resistance might look like. His honest struggle to preserve his conflicting attitudes deepens our understanding of life in commercial society.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Smith's pronounced worries about ambition in commercial society call into question the popular caricature of him as an enthusiastic advocate of *laissez faire* capitalism and unbridled self-interest. Even more, his views on ambition give us reason to think he is genuinely ambivalent towards commercial society. Smith is simultaneously unwilling to deny the endemic problems he sees in commercial society or dismiss the immense economic, social, and political benefits that stem from its dynamism. To wholeheartedly embrace one side or the other, like Mandeville or (possibly) Rousseau, would do violence to Smith's honest and well-grounded opposing assessments. As Rorty suggests, to "pull up your socks and get over ambivalence" can sometimes be self-deceptive, difficult to maintain, and anathema to integrity.<sup>48</sup> By affirming his opposing attitudes, Smith is able to offer a richer account of how commerce, prosperity, happiness, and the passion of ambition intertwine.

Finally, Smith's ambivalence towards commercial society makes him more relevant to those of us living in contemporary capitalist societies than if he were merely an unreflective partisan of commerce. Surely commercial society has provided opulence beyond the wildest dreams of an eighteenth century moral philosopher. Comparatively high life expectancies, widely available consumer goods, and individual freedom testify to the vitality of the economic system closely associated with Smith's name. Nevertheless, his justification for commercial society in economic security and the tie between tranquility and happiness should also give us pause about the increasingly precarious and insecure nature of life in many advanced economies. Further, Smith's prescient worries about the consuming ambition for wealth, social

---

<sup>48</sup> Rorty, "A Plea for Ambivalence," 431.

status, and “trinkets of frivolous utility” are more pressing than ever in an age of mass media, omnipresent advertising, and technological progress. The underlying rationale that motivates Smith’s ambivalence echoes many of our contemporary reasons for being of two minds about capitalism. Smith’s ambivalence and struggle is, in many ways, our own.

## REFERENCES

- Darwall, Stephen. "Smith's Ambivalence about Honor." *Honor, History, and Relationship: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics II*, 30-49. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Fleischacker, Samuel. *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Griswold, Charles. *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Hanley, Ryan. *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Hirschman, Albert O. *The Passions and the Interests: Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals*. Edited by J.B. Schneewind. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. edited L.A. Selby-Bigge. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1985 [First published 1651].
- Keynes, John Maynard. "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren." *Essays in Persuasion*. New York: Norton, 1963.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Edited by Quentin Skinner and Russell Price. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Otteson, James. *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Rasmussen, Dennis. *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008.
- Rorty, Amelia. "A Plea for Ambivalence." *Oxford Handbook of Emotion* edited by Peter Goldie, 425-444. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Man." Edited by Victor Gourevitch. New York: Cambridge University Press. [First Published 1755].

Seneca. "On Anger." *Moral and Political Essays* edited by John M Cooper and J.F. Precope. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Smith, Adam. "A Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*." *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, edited by W.P.D Wightman and J.C. Bryce. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982.

Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Edited R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner, and W.B. Todd. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981 [first edition published 1776].

Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Edited D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982 [first edition published 1759; sixth edition published 1790]