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Ambitions – Glen Pettigrove

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In the early 1930s, the Pittsburgh Public School system commissioned George W. Gerwig to write three books for their *Guideposts to Character* series. Each was to contain a year's worth of lessons aimed at helping "pupils in the middle and higher grades" to develop an important virtue (1932, inside cover). One was on perseverance, a second on loyalty. The third was entitled *Ambition: An Element in the Character of the Good American*, which contained 200 daily lessons intended to foster the great American virtue, ambition. More than 70 years later, many of us will find the idea of such a book surprising. This may be because we consider ambition a vice not a virtue. Or it may be because, even if we think ambition has some value, we aren't sure it is great enough to warrant an entire year's worth of instruction: if we grant that it is a virtue, we still might think it a rather minor one.¹

Which of these positions should we adopt? Is ambition a virtue or a vice? And how important a virtue or vice is it? Were we to approach these questions in the way American politicians approach an election year, we would begin by lining up celebrity endorsements for the two major parties. The virtue party would enjoy the endorsements of Aristotle, George Santayana, Walter Kaufmann and George W. Bush.² The vice party would have the backing of Thomas Aquinas, Niccolo Machiavelli, John Locke and Aristotle (who, like a prudent corporate sponsor, is

¹ We may also find Gerwig's book astonishing because of a change in attitudes toward teaching values in schools.

² "Our greatest advantage in the world has always been our educated, hard-working, ambitious people and we are going to keep that edge" (Bush, quoted in Bumiller and Nagourney, 2006).

funding both candidates in this race). Plato would be backing the independent party, arguing that if ambition is a virtue it is, at best, a second rate one.

Although Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Harrington, Locke, Pascal, Hutcheson, Rousseau, Smith, Santayana and a number of others have discussed ambition, it has seldom received more than a few paragraphs worth of analysis. This brevity is surprising when one reflects on the fact that ambition plays a significant role in Western politics (one cannot be elected without it). It is even more startling in light of the fact that Machiavelli, Harrington, Locke and Rousseau each considered it to be among the greatest threats to political security. The aim of this paper is to provide a long overdue analysis of ambition. The first part of the paper explores what ambition is, offering a more precise account of ambition than has been offered heretofore. I then turn to the question of ambition's normative status.

Defining Ambition

When philosophers write about ambition, they tend to construe it as a kind of desire. David Hume, for example, defines ambition as a desire for power.³ By power he does not mean merely the ability to achieve one's ends, but quite especially "an authority over others."⁴ What is distinctive about the ambitious, on Hume's account, is that they desire to have a kind of authority that enables them to direct others' actions. While Hume's definition of ambition is well suited to describe Shakespeare's

³ See Hume (2003), Book 2, Part 1, Section 8, paragraph 4 (hereafter cited as 2.1.8.4). Benjamin Franklin in his speech before the Constitutional Convention on "the subject of salaries" offers a similar account of ambition, defining it as the "Love of Power." However, in spite of beginning with this definition, the entirety of Franklin's subsequent discussion is framed in terms of the desire for honor (Franklin, 1987, pp. 1131-1134).

⁴ See Hume (2003), 2.1.10.11-12, and 2.2.8.14.

Macbeth or Ridley Scott's Commodus, it works less well for others who strike us as equally ambitious. Homer's Agamemnon, Odysseus and Achilles are clearly ambitious, but they are more desirous of honor than power. Their example suggests that Hume's definition should be broadened.

A number of other objects have been proposed as the focus of ambition's desire. Aristotle, Aquinas, Hutcheson and Smith, like Homer, take honor to be the object of ambition: "To deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind, are the great objects of ambition and emulation" (Smith, 1982, p. 62).⁵ Plato at times uses *philotimia* (love of honor) and *philonikia* (love of victory) interchangeably, suggesting a third object for ambition's desire, viz., victory or success.⁶ Still others add wealth, knowledge and perfection to the list of possible objects of the ambitious desire.⁷

Alexis de Tocqueville suggests a way to unify the preceding list. He speaks of ambition as "a yearning desire to rise" (1994, p. 243). Each of the items in our list could be characterized in this way, and doing so highlights two important qualities of ambition's desire. First, it reaches above its current station. The desire for a lateral

⁵ See also Aristotle (1939) 1107b-1108a4; Aquinas (1981) Part II-II, Question 181, Article 1; and Hutcheson (2002) p. 56.

⁶ See Plato, *Republic* 550b; and *Timaeus* 90b.

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks of knowledge as the interest of "the ambitious soul" (1996, p.55). The context makes it clear that Emerson is speaking of knowledge of something significant. Aiming to know how many blades of grass grow on the university lawn would not make one ambitious. Rather, as Rosalind Hursthouse put it, it would make one "a crazy coot." William Kerrigan discusses knowledge, fame and power as objects of ambition's desire (1996). Robert Kaplan speaks of ambition in terms of a number of related desires, including the desire to be better than others, to succeed, to advance in one's career, to be esteemed by one's superiors, and to perform one's job perfectly (1991, pp. 17, 24, 27).

career move would not ordinarily count as a case of ambition, nor would a millionaire's desire for 50 cents that he saw sitting at the bottom of a wishing well. Second, typically ambition's objects are not desired simply because they are deemed good. Nor are they desired just because they are better than what we currently possess. Often they are desired because it is thought that acquiring them will somehow make us not just better-off but better *persons*.

Tocqueville's comment points to two additional qualities of ambition's desire, viz., its strength and its frequent presence to thought. Sometimes a desire is weak enough that it can easily be displaced by another. Ambition, by contrast, is not so readily set aside, and if its desire is unfulfilled, the ambitious person will be disappointed. Further, a yearning desire is frequently on one's mind. Unlike some desires it is not easily relegated to the background but, instead, is often the focus of one's attention.

"A yearning desire to rise" gets us closer to ambition than we were at the start, but the definition remains, as yet, incomplete. For it does not allow us to distinguish between ambition and mere wishful thinking. Someone like Little Chandler from James Joyce's *Dubliners* has a strong desire to rise, to write something that would get him noticed and bring him respect. But this desire is not ambition, nor would it become ambition simply in virtue of its lasting over days, weeks or years. In fact it is part of Joyce's point that Little Chandler's desire is not ambition. It is no more than the wishful daydream of another ambitionless Dubliner.

What else is needed for Little Chandler's desire to become ambition? What is missing is a translation of the desire into action. Ambition's object must not only be desired; it must also be pursued. And this pursuit must continue even in the face of setbacks.

These observations highlight four further features of ambition. The first is that, in addition to a desire, ambition involves a self-disciplined commitment or determination to obtain its object. The second is that the commitment and desire of ambition must manifest themselves in actions. These actions must extend beyond merely dwelling in thought upon the desired object to taking steps seen as instrumental to achieving ambition's end. Third, ambition's end cannot be achieved overnight. Its achievement is temporally distant and usually requires that one plan and execute various intermediate stages. Fourth, the end toward which ambition's desire and commitment are directed is difficult to achieve.

Specifying the nature of the difficulty surrounding ambition's object is not entirely straightforward. One might try to spell it out in terms of the probability of the outcome. Ambition's success is, in some sense, improbable. I say, "in some sense," because relative to the abilities and social position of a particular individual, it may be more probable that he will achieve the desired end than it is that anyone else will. Given that Charles is the king's only son, it is more likely that he will become the next king than it is that anyone else will. However, as there will be very few kings in any generation, relative to the number of individuals who might want to be kings, it is improbable that any one person will become king. Thus, we might try to specify the difficulty of ambition's aim in terms of the general probability of its achievement. However, this description will not work. For there might be a society in which the vast majority of the population is in the middle and upper classes, so that the general probability that any individual will be a member of the middle or upper class is quite high. Nonetheless, in this society a yearning desire to rise to the middle or upper class (together with commitment, etc.) clearly would be an example of ambition when it occurred in a member of the lowest class. This example invites us to characterize the

difficulty in terms of relative probability rather than general probability. But when we do so, Charles' desire to be king no longer looks like ambition. Perhaps the best way to characterize the difficulty is disjunctively: ambition's success must be improbable either relative to the individual or more generally.

There is one sense in which the achievement of ambition's aim cannot be improbable. For a desire to which one is committed to count as ambition, ordinarily one must also possess an ability to bring it to fruition. One need not be able to do everything on one's own. In fact, ordinarily, quite the contrary is true. Obtaining the object of ambition's desire typically depends, in part, upon the actions of others and on a measure of good luck. But if a person is completely lacking in ability in a particular area, we do not generally speak of her being ambitious in that area even if she has a fervent desire and an active commitment. Instead we speak of her having an unhealthy or delusional obsession. For this reason, a measure of success in achieving intermediate goals on the way to ambition's ultimate goal is typically also required before we are inclined to speak of someone's yearning desire as ambition.

Many of the objects of ambition have a competitive quality. What counts as a desirable amount of money or power is defined in terms of exceeding the power or wealth of others. Honor, too, involves competition, insofar as acquiring it requires outdoing one's peers: honor is not accorded to the average, only to the extraordinary. However, ambition need not involve self-conscious competition with others. This possibility is most apparent in cases where ambition's object is something like knowledge, artistic accomplishment or perfection. Of course, one *could* conceive of the desired amount of knowledge relative to the knowledge of others, as does Pip in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. However, one need not. Instead, one might conceive of it relative to one's current condition or relative to human potential. Likewise, if

ambition's aim is artistic accomplishment, this might be defined relative to what others have achieved (at some point in one's artistic development, it may even be necessary to do so). On the other hand, it might be defined relative to what is possible, given the limitations of the medium with which one is working and the potential scope of human creativity. Even in the case of honor, which is only accorded when one has outdone others, the competition need not be self-conscious. One may desire it, perhaps as a way to satisfy the desire for recognition or respect, without reflecting on the fact that the world only bestows honor on those who have surpassed their peers.⁸

For the sake of convenience, to this point I have been speaking as though the objects of ambition were all discrete ends that with effort and a bit of luck could be achieved. But this way of speaking is somewhat misleading, for it suggests that the ambitious desire could be satisfied, at which point ambition would no longer figure in the thoughts or motivations of the formerly ambitious agent. While it is possible for a person's ambition to have a discrete object of this sort such that ambition, upon fulfillment, would disappear, such ambition would seem the exception rather than the rule. Ordinarily the objects of ambition are such as allow of continual, unending increase. One does not just want to earn a six figure salary; one wants wealth. One does not merely want to publish the book; one wants to become a better (or more respected, or more prolific) writer. However much wealth, power, esteem, knowledge or perfection one has, there is always more that one could desire. There is always another goal beyond each achievement to which ambition's gaze is already directed, because these accomplishments are stages in a never-ending progression. In such cases ambition's desire may never be fully discharged.

⁸ While social recognition is essential to ambition for honor, it is not essential to all ambitions.

The pursuit of the kind of ambition that is never fully discharged could be experienced as a series of partial satisfactions. Each milestone brings a measure of enjoyment, but the overall desire remains constant. William Kerrigan suggests an alternative picture in which ambition is governed by what Freud called “the forepleasure principle.”⁹ As in sexual foreplay, where each step toward the fulfillment of one’s desire heightens one’s arousal, each intermediate accomplishment may magnify ambition’s desire. Thus, the more power or honor or knowledge one gets, the more one wants.

There is a fourth way in which ambition could be experienced. What motivates the ambitious individual in her pursuit need not be solely the attractions of ambition’s object. In the consciousness of several of Robert Kaplan’s case studies, for example, the desire to excel and be esteemed were also described as “insecurity” and “fear of failure”(1991, pp. 24, 91-2). Likewise, William James notes the close connection between ambition and “the impulse to imitate what you see another doing, in order not to appear inferior”(1992, pp. 742-6). The fear of falling short is often as great or greater than the positive attractions of achievement. And since, whatever one’s past accomplishments, tomorrow always holds new prospects for failure, an ambition of this sort could never fully be discharged.

These differences in the way ambition is experienced are significant. Whether one’s ambition brings satisfaction or merely staves off fear for another day will affect not only the pleasure an agent might derive from ambition, but also the strength of its motivational grip on the agent relative to competing interests, and the role it might play in a well-lived life. In many cases ambition will be experienced in several of

⁹ See Kerrigan (1996) pp. 13ff; Freud (1953) pp. 210-12 and (1959) pp. 152-3.

these ways at different times. The normative evaluation of ambition will depend, at least in part, on which of these kinds of ambition one has in view.

The account of ambition that emerges from the preceding observations is that ambition involves a yearning desire to rise that is committedly pursued.¹⁰ Its aims and motivations differ from a simple desire to acquire more money, power, knowledge or fame in a number of respects. First, ambition's desire is intense and frequently on the agent's mind. Second, ambition is concerned not just with having more but with being (or being seen to be) more, i.e., the ambitious agent often sees her pursuit not simply in terms of improving her material or social conditions but in terms of improving *herself*. Third, ambition's object is in some sense unlikely to be obtained. Finally, its pursuit may be motivated both by the perceived goodness of the object and by a fear of failure.¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. Wrye (1994) p. 130.

¹¹ One might worry that this characterization is still too narrow. It seems to exclude two kinds of cases where we often speak of someone being ambitious, viz., the ambitious social reformer and the ambitious parent. Often these cases will conform to the description I have offered. The social reformer may desire the social reform because it will bring about a rise in his or her own social condition. Likewise the parent may desire the child's success as a way to secure an improvement in the parent's condition. In neither case need the sense of an improvement in one's condition be defined in an explicitly individualistic way: one may yearn for social reform or a child's success because one sees one's identity as fully tied up with that of the child or the group. On the other hand, one might think that some ambitious social reformers or parents are more altruistic than this. In such cases, I'm inclined to think our sense of 'ambitious' is borrowed from the definition I have offered of what we might call paradigmatic or full-fledged ambition, even though the resemblance between the two cases is inexact. The altruistically 'ambitious' parent may have a strong desire for her child's success and she may pursue the conditions that would make it possible, but in so doing she is not concerned with improving her own condition.

The Value of Ambition

Is ambition a good thing or a bad? When one person says ambition is good and another bad, they are often talking past one another rather than genuinely contradicting each other. The first has in view the willingness to take on big projects and actively see them to completion. For him, ambition is identified with industriousness and stands in contrast with laziness or timidity.¹² The second conceives of ambition in terms of a constant and insatiable desire for more, or in terms of an insecure need for others' approval. For her, ambition is understood in contrast with satisfaction and tranquility.¹³ It isn't as though either of these speakers is mistaken in their use of the word 'ambition.' But each of them leaves out important aspects of what we might call ambition in the fullest sense. It is the latter that I have tried to characterize above and that stands in most need of evaluation.

One way to evaluate ambition is in terms of its object. Historically, moralists have vilified the desire for objects like power and wealth and eulogized the desire for things like knowledge and perfection, saying desires of the former sort are bad because their objects are bad, whereas desires of the latter kind are good because their

I think a similar story will account for cases where we would be inclined to say someone is ambitious to *A* even though we wouldn't say she is ambitious full stop. In such a case the agent and object possess some of the qualities of full-fledged ambition, but not all of them. *A* may be difficult, for example, and the agent may be committed to achieving it. But she may lack the yearning desire or *A* may not be tied up with her sense of self.

¹² See Kaufmann (1961) p. 318 and (1973), pp. 117-18, and 127.

¹³ Cf. Smith (1982) pp. 50-7; and Rogers (1961).

objects are good.¹⁴ But this characterization will not do. Even the most suspicious of ambition's objects, viz., wealth and power, are good, even if only instrumentally.

There are contexts in which it is legitimate to want and strive for them. Having been ostracized by his own community and forced to take up residence in a new village where there is no one on whom he can depend if he is in need, it is quite sensible for Silas Marner to eagerly desire financial security. Likewise, when Nelson Mandela is sitting in a South African prison for opposing apartheid, it is appropriate for him to desire greater political power.

Refining the standard for object-based evaluation, then, one might suggest that ambition is good when its object is good. This formulation allows that in some situations more money, power, status and the like will be worth desiring and pursuing and in others they won't. Ambition will be good in the former contexts and bad in the latter.

Articulating the standard in this way allows us to identify a problem to which ambitions for instrumental goods like wealth and power are particularly susceptible. At the outset the person ambitious for wealth desired more money because it would help him avoid the sufferings associated with poverty or it would help him gain the admiration of people whose approval he desired. But even after he has the means to enjoy balanced meals, reliable shelter, and the acceptance of his desired social group, the ambitious may continue to pursue the goal of acquiring more, even if it comes at some cost to the physical and social objectives from which it first issued. Thus, Silas

¹⁴ Adam Smith's distinction between an ambition that pursues "the study of wisdom and the practice of virtue," and one that concerns itself with "the acquisition of wealth and greatness," might appear to advocate such an approach to the evaluation of ambition. However, the context makes it clear that Smith's account of ambition's value is richer than the one-dimensional picture currently on view (1982, p. 62).

Marner gets out his gold every night to admire it and works extended hours so that he can acquire more of it, long after he has obtained the financial security at which he originally and reasonably aimed. When the ambition persists even after its object is no longer worth pursuing, this principle claims, it will be objectionable.¹⁵

This formulation of the object-based standard, while an improvement on the first, is still insufficiently nuanced. For the worth of the object is not a sufficient condition for the goodness of the ambition. The good object may be pursued from problematic motives or may require objectionable means. These observations suggest that we should assess the value of ambition not in terms of a single condition, but rather in terms of a set of conditions each of which may affect its value. The value of ambition's object will be an important member of this set, but not the only one.

When we assess the value of ambition, there are six factors to which we must attend. The first is the value of its object. Is its object (a) worth desiring and (b) with this intensity? The second factor is the adequacy of ambition's construal of the worth of its object. Does the object have the import ambition ascribes to it? The third factor is ambition's motive. Why and how does one pursue this end? Is it internally or externally driven? The fourth is ambition's outcome. Does it produce more or less good in the world? The fifth consideration is what kind of action its pursuit would require. And the sixth is its role in structuring a life.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Dombrowski (1989).

¹⁶ One natural way to characterize this section is as an attempt to make explicit what it means for ambition to be felt "at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right [object], for the right purpose and in the right manner" (Aristotle, 1939, 1106b21ff.). I shall say more below about the relation between my account and Aristotle's.

In addition to the worth of ambition's object, an ambition's value is shaped by its construal of that worth.¹⁷ How does the ambition's representation of the worth of its object compare to its intersubjectively recognized value? The importance of this question is underscored by two features of ambition that we have already noted. First, ambition can be directed toward objects that are only instrumentally good. When ambition takes an object which is only instrumentally good, it is open to several kinds of error. One may be confused about the object's instrumental properties. For example, one may be confused about the value of a particular accomplishment (say, becoming a Senator) for one's overall career objective (becoming President). Or ambition's extended pursuit of the object may lead one to fixate on it, thereby overlooking changes that alter its value or mistaking its merely instrumental value for intrinsic value. Second, ambition is often aimed at an object that it is thought will not only better one's circumstances but will also better oneself. It can be appropriate to desire each of these things but we ought not confuse them. Acquiring more money or fame will only do the former. Acquiring knowledge may involve bettering oneself, as might setting and achieving goals, perfecting one's artistic abilities, and realizing one's potential, but they needn't. Making oneself more deserving of honor and pursuing moral betterment will (almost) always involve bettering oneself. Finally, ambition may involve confusion about the relative worth of its object, leading one to value a lesser end more highly than a greater one.

The worth of ambition's object and the ambitious agent's knowledge of that worth both affect the ambition's value. Other things being equal, an ambition focused on a relatively unimportant object will be less valuable than one whose aim is more

¹⁷ For a recent defense of the Socratic claim that *all* virtues involve a certain kind of construal, viz., on that entails knowledge, see Brady (2005).

significant. Similarly, other things being equal, an ambition which is clear-sighted about its object's value, will be more admirable than one that values its object out of a mistaken sense of its worth. Nonetheless, neither of these conditions is necessary for an ambition to be valuable, because the goodness of a particular ambition may derive from its pursuit rather than from its object or from one's knowledge of that object. The pursuit may prove valuable even when the object pursued is worthless or one is confused about its worth (I shall have more to say about this possibility below).

A third factor to consider when assessing the value of ambition is its motivation. To put the point this way invites some confusion. Having defined ambition as a yearning desire to rise that is committedly pursued, one might think the motivation is already built into the definition. Once we have identified the domain in which the rise is contextualized, be it power, wealth, knowledge, honor, or whatever, the motivation is the desire for that object. However, this is not what I wish to pick out when I speak of ambition's motivation. I am concerned with how and why the agent desires this object. She might desire it out of an appreciation for its intrinsic worth. She might desire it because others who are significant in her life desire it. Or she might desire it because she wants to outdo or fears falling behind others who are striving toward a similar goal.¹⁸

The first of these motives is the foundation for many attempts to argue that ambition can be a virtue. Its heroic icon is the gifted artist who single-mindedly pursues the perfect performance, composition, painting or paragraph without regard to

¹⁸ So, for example, Lachmann (1988) analyses a patient who defines ambition, in part, in terms of wanting to outdo others and succeed in her career.

fame or fortune.¹⁹ By contrast, an ambition stemming from anything other than an appreciation for the intrinsic worth of the object appears morally suspicious. Such an ambition might seem heteronomous, because its direction is determined by someone outside the agent.²⁰ Or it might seem inauthentic, because the values to which it is responsive are not its own but those of the competitor, the role model or the society. It might seem petty or envious, or be thought to manifest a deficient level of self-esteem. Or it might seem unduly susceptible to corruption, because there is no guarantee that one's competitors, role models or society will pursue that which is moral.²¹

However, the conclusion that an ambition is objectionable when it stems from something other than an appreciation for the value of its object is too hasty. First, it assumes that these different motivations are mutually exclusive in a way that they need not be. One could care about one's goal out of an appreciation for its value, as well as because others care about it and one doesn't want to be outdone. Second, not all emulations are heteronomous, inauthentic or lacking in a proper level of self-esteem. There are autonomous and authentic ways of learning from others and appropriating their values as well as heteronomous and inauthentic ones. Likewise, as

¹⁹ See Meissner (1997); and Kaufmann (1973) pp. 119-121. Alasdair MacIntyre(1984) speaks of the characters who embody the ideals of a culture. The characters who typify the ideal of ambition are the artist, the inventor, and the self-made captain of industry. The third of these has seen its halo tarnished in recent years by corporate-executive-scandals. But its continuing cultural significance is illustrated by its tenacity. It remains an important cultural icon in spite of its bad press.

²⁰ According to Hogan and Schroeder (1980), their presumed lack of autonomy and deficient self-respect were two of the reasons achievement-oriented personalities were deemed psychologically unhealthy by Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler and Carl Rogers.

²¹ Aquinas, for example, expresses this worry (1981, Pt II-II, Q 131, A 1).

William James observes, “There is a noble and generous kind of rivalry, as well as a spiteful and greedy kind . . . [T]he deepest spring of action in us is the sight of action in another. The spectacle of effort is what awakens and sustains our own effort” (1992, p. 744).

Thus, desiring something because others do or with an eye to outperforming others need not be objectionable and an ambition shaped by such a desire likewise need not be problematic. Nevertheless, two caveats are called for. First, although emulation of and competition with others may be what spark ambition’s efforts and aspirations, and may continue to play a significant role in its ongoing strivings, eventually we hope they shall be accompanied and then superseded by an appreciation for the value of the tasks in which they are engaged and the worth of that at which they aim. An ambition in which an orientation to the value of its object does not ultimately take on an overriding role will have a much harder time parrying the objections voiced above. It would also be more susceptible to becoming petty, inauthentic and misdirected, and as such would be deficient. It might not be completely without value solely on that account, but it would certainly be less valuable than it could be. Second, the nature of the rivalry must be carefully assessed. In most competitions, the advancement of one need not involve the diminishment of another, but the spirit in which one engages in competition may involve such a dynamic. It may be built around an “invidious comparison” according to which I am a success because you are a failure; “you are despised and I am praised . . . ; you are nothing and I am something”(Mahan, 2002, p. 92).²² Such a spirit will vitiate ambition.

²² Mahan borrows the term ‘invidious comparison’ from Veblen (1931). The latter part of the sentence is a passage Mahan quotes from Merton (1961).

There is another worry regarding ambition's motivation that is in many ways the obverse of the first. Whereas the former worry was that ambition might arise out of too great a concern for the interests and opinions of others, this objection is built around the assumption that ambition is insufficiently concerned with the interests and opinions of others. Ambition, it is thought, is inescapably selfish.²³ It is one's own rise that is earnestly desired and eagerly pursued. It is one's own goals that are the focus of one's industry, and these goals are self-referring. It is not merely the design of the magnificent building, the flawless performance, the exploration of Mars, the discovery of the important archaeological site or the cure for cancer that one desires. It is one's own designing, performing, exploring or discovering that is the focus of one's longing. When one of these worthy ends is achieved by someone else, the ambitious person is likely to be disappointed rather than pleased. How things turn out for others is either outside ambition's purview, if they are unrelated to the achieving of one's end, or the object of unsavory attention if they stand in one's way.

This is a legitimate worry, but it should not be overstated. If ambition leads one to disregard the needs and interests of others in contexts where one has an obligation to attend to such, then it is problematic. The same is true if it leads to a malevolent interest in others, or even just an inability to appreciate significant breakthroughs or achievements for no other reason than because they are not one's own. Institutions that foster such ambitions should be altered. However, the mere fact that it is self-referring does not mean that ambition is selfish, and it is not the case that the ideally virtuous person would not adopt self-referring aims. The spectator is expected to appreciate architectural designs and scientific, archaeological and astronomical discoveries independently of whose they are. But we do not expect the

²³ Cf. Aquinas (1981) Pt II-II, Q 131, A 1.

same attitude from the participants, nor should we. Perhaps as a member of the orchestra I should appreciate the fact that someone in the orchestra enjoyed a flawless performance. But I should not be indifferent to the fact that it was not I. Likewise, it is not enough for the virtuous agent to want someone or other to be courageous, benevolent, temperate or wise. She should want to manifest those qualities herself and be disappointed if the situation called for one of them and she was not up to the task. Some such self-referring aims are essential for the life of virtue, both for its development and for its maintenance.²⁴ Further, it would strike us as odd if a person celebrated the ordinary achievements of strangers in the same way they celebrated their own. It is only in the case of truly exceptional achievements that we expect anything different. And even then, although their disappointment ought not completely occlude their view of and appreciation for the value of the accomplishment, there is room for participants to experience a measure of disappointment at not being the one to have pulled off the remarkable feat.

Were we to have to assess ambition in general, we might be hard pressed to say whether it has produced more good or bad consequences. On the one hand, one might worry about its tendencies toward social maladjustment, the harm and disappointment that inevitably result from competition for scarce resources, a tenacity in the pursuit of its goal that prevents an adequate appreciation of other values. One may think of the sacrifice of the many for the achievements of a few, be those many the common soldiers sacrificed for the likes of Caesar and Napoleon, or be they the many everyday pleasures sacrificed for the sake of the overarching pursuit. On the other hand, one could bring to mind the achievements of Mozarts and Edisons.

William James may overstate the case when he claims that “the ambitious impulses”

²⁴ Cf. Williams (1973) pp. 95ff.

are the source of almost all social, moral and pedagogical improvements (1992, pp. 744-5), but there is clearly something to his remark. Ambition has both helped and haunted civilizations and individuals, leading to unprecedented advances as well as unimaginable atrocities.

Whether ambition is likely to produce good consequences or bad will depend, in part, on the nature of its object and motivation, on the person's other opportunities and obligations, and on the relation of that person's ambition to practical wisdom, love, and other virtues. In other words, not surprisingly, our assessment of it will depend upon the details of the case. One thing we *can* say about the consequences of ambition in general is that the prima facie, outcome-based case against ambition is not as strong as it might appear. Numerous studies have suggested, contrary to the anti-social stereotype, that those who are "intellectually gifted" *and* ambitious generally demonstrate more moral and emotional maturity and are better adjusted socially than their equally gifted but less ambitious peers. It is only among "people with unusually high levels of demonstrated vocational and artistic achievement" that social maladjustment becomes the norm rather than the exception (Hogan and Schroeder, 1980, pp. 39-42).

The fourth factor to consider when evaluating ambition is the sort of action required to achieve one's aim. What means are required in the pursuit of one's end, and are these means in themselves morally problematic? In some arenas one might think the value of the end achieved is overshadowed by the means that must be employed in its pursuit. For example, a recent article in *The New Zealand Herald* offered counsel on "How you can get to the top." It advised, "To get the promotion you need to get in with the movers and shakers in your business. . . . 'Painful as it

may be, you've got to put your old networks behind you'" (Jackson, 2006).²⁵ The rest of the article explains that, to get ahead in today's corporate culture, one should be strategic about whom one befriends and be prepared to abandon friends for the sake of the next promotion. Were this counsel offered not just with respect to the casual work acquaintances that we sometimes call friends, but also to deeper and more lasting relationships, it would clearly fail to appreciate the nature and norms of friendship. But even if it is limited to our more casual working relationships, it is objectionable. It is one thing to adapt oneself to the necessities of being separated from others or developing new "networks" because of relocation. It is quite another to cultivate relationships in which one maintains the pretence of friendship for the purpose of self-promotion.

Of course, not all career-related ambitions require adopting dubious means. However, success for some agents or in some arenas may. If one is not a member of the royal family and one has made it one's ambition to become the next king or queen, the courses available are all likely to be objectionable. This fact accounts for some of the anxiety that Seneca, Machiavelli, Harrington, Locke and Rousseau had regarding ambition's destabilizing effect on the state.²⁶ Similar dilemmas arise in more mundane political contexts. One of the problems is the familiar issue of dirty hands: the worry is that, in order to get into office and to perform its tasks successfully, one cannot keep one's hands clean but must lie, engage in backroom deal-making with powerful constituencies, and compromise one's personal integrity

²⁵ Jackson quotes the latter sentence from an interview with Lucy McGee, director of Development Dimensions International, a human resources consulting firm based in Stoke Poges, United Kingdom.

²⁶ The worries about insatiability, selfishness and a disregard for competing values account for the rest.

as well as one's political ideals.²⁷ Both the costs of running for national office in the United States and the ubiquity of negative advertising during campaigns throw the problem of dirty hands into clear relief. Politicians who wish to be (re)elected need to line up corporate sponsors, which often involves making deals with these sponsors to promote or prevent legislation that is in the interest of that corporation but may not be in the interest of the general public. Because campaign ads that attack a candidate's opponent are more effective than those that champion the candidate's own ideas, it is difficult in an environment where negative ads dominate the air waves for a person to run a successful campaign without assassinating her opponent's character. No less troubling than the issue of dirty hands are the personal and relational costs of acquiring and holding a political office at any level beyond the local. The time away from home that is required and the deleterious effect this has on one's ability to be a good parent, spouse or friend makes even garden variety political ambitions appear dubious. Unless the political process is altered both in its substance and in its sponsorship, it is difficult to see how someone could pursue a political ambition in an unobjectionable way. If the stakes involved are high enough, the aim pursued worthy enough, the anticipated outcome valuable enough, then the ambition may be defensible even when the necessary means are objectionable in the ways just outlined. But I suspect these conditions are met less often than the ambitious might wish to admit. At the very least, unavoidably objectionable means will lower the value of the ambition and will present a *prima facie* reason against endorsing it.

The final factor to consider when assessing ambition is its role in structuring a life. Part of ambition's value derives from the ways that it can give our lives

²⁷ For an early discussion of the issue see Sophocles (1957).

structure, direction and significance.²⁸ One way it does this is by narrowing the field of possibilities that are open to an agent, helping restrict them to a manageable few. Without such a narrowing, we tend to feel overwhelmed by the possibilities. The consequent ambivalence makes it difficult to choose a course of action, and when we do the result is inevitably unsatisfying because our commitment to that decision is only half-hearted.

A more important way ambition can give a life structure and significance is by enabling an agent to see her life as meaningful.²⁹ Ambition can provide a project that she finds engaging and sees as worthwhile. It can provide a benchmark in relation to which she can see her life as improving, which can, in turn, bring with it a feeling of fulfillment. These benefits are more reliably obtained if the aim of her ambition is intersubjectively recognized as worthy of pursuit. If it is not, it is vulnerable. Others may try to persuade her that her project is less worthy than she had thought and, if they succeed, her changed perspective may lead to a crisis of meaning. She may then have difficulty seeing her prior pursuits as meaningful and may find herself without an alternative project to re-engage her interest and passion. Nonetheless, ambition can provide direction and meaning for an individual even if the object she has chosen to pursue is not especially valuable. An example should help to illustrate this point.

Geoff is a young man raised in the Church of the Harmless Heretics who, after hearing a particularly stirring sermon, makes it his aim to become a great preacher. As a result of adopting this aim, he studies hard and refrains from drinking. He involves himself in community service so that he can observe a wide range of people from different walks of life and come to understand the styles of communication they

²⁸ Cf. Frankfurt (2004) pp. 58-9; and Mahan (2002) pp. 95-6.

²⁹ The subsequent discussion owes much to Wolf (1997a) and (1997b).

find moving. Through his service activities he meets a like-minded woman with whom he falls in love and to whom he is married. Eventually he comes to pastor his own congregation of Harmless Heretics, raises his children to be responsible members of the community, and becomes a great orator.

Now, there is nothing especially valuable about the object of Geoff's ambition. Becoming a great preacher in some traditions might lead listeners to the understanding of divine truths or encourage them to become agents of social change, but not in the Church of the Harmless Heretics. Their doctrines are, *ex hypothesi*, false. And since they are primarily concerned with metaphysical speculation about the essential properties of heaps and piles and of the vague differences between them, great sermons do not encourage listeners to become either more or less politically involved. In spite of its object's lack of value, Geoff's ambition can nonetheless provide his life with meaning and direction. In the pursuit of his ambition, he develops a number of valuable character traits, including self-discipline, intellectual rigour, and rhetorical skill. As an accidental consequence of his ambition he gets involved in community service, falls in love and raises a family. His ambition provides the framework within which traits, relationships and events that are intersubjectively recognized as valuable become possible. As a result, even though its object may lack value, Geoff's ambition provides the condition that makes it possible for his life to be both meaningful and fulfilling.³⁰

³⁰ Specifying exactly what it means for a life to be meaningful is notoriously difficult. Wolf (1997) suggests that any satisfactory account will need to distinguish the following related conditions from one another. The first is the condition of being engaged in projects that strike one as worth doing. The second is the condition of being engaged in projects that are genuinely worthwhile, which at the very least means being intersubjectively recognized to be projects of worth. The third is the condition of finding one's projects fulfilling. Wolf argues that a meaningful life must satisfy the first and second of

Virtuous and Vicious Ambitions

To this point I have outlined the characteristics of ambition that can give it value or rob it of the same. We are finally in a position to answer the question with which we began: Is ambition a virtue or a vice?

If virtues are traits of character that virtuous agents will approve and vices are traits they will disapprove, then ambition will sometimes be a virtue and sometimes a vice. For ideally virtuous agents will approve traits that are valuable and will eschew those without value.³¹ As there are a number of ways in which ambition can possess or lack value, there are a number of ways it can be virtuous or vicious. If ambition is for a good object whose goodness is properly seen, if it is motivated by an appreciation for the object's value, is pursued through unobjectionable means, generates a desirable outcome and is meaningful, then its virtue will be clear. If it is

these conditions: one must be engaged by projects that one takes to be worth doing and they must be intersubjectively recognized to be projects of worth (pp. 209-12). I'm not sure she is right in this regard, but that is a matter for another paper. In this context what I wish to note is that, although the object of Geoff's ambition is not intersubjectively recognized as valuable, his life still may be. Thus, on Wolf's account, his life could be meaningful in virtue of its enabling him to engage in other projects and involve himself in relationships that are of genuine worth, even though what he takes to be its aim is not.

³¹ As an account of virtue and vice this characterization is inadequate. However, in this paper I do not intend to offer a general account of virtue and vice. What I intend to offer is an analysis of ambition that will be of use across a range of normative theories. The very thin characterization of virtue and vice that I have offered serves this end. Millians, Kantians, Humeans, Aristotelians and others will offer different accounts of what gives a character trait value and thus of what elicits the admiration of the virtuous. But they will all agree that virtues will be approved and vices disapproved by the virtuous.

for a bad object that is poorly understood, is motivated by a lack of self-esteem, anxiety, envy, selfishness, or invidious comparison, brings pain to the agent and those with whom she has to do, is pursued by debased means and fails to be meaningful, then its viciousness will be apparent.

Insofar as this view suggests that ambition can be a virtue as well as a vice, it is like Aristotle's.³² English, like Greek, uses the same word to pick out both virtuous and vicious instances of it. And his injunction that ambition's object should be desired "from the right sources and in the right way" could serve as a gloss on several of the factors I have identified as contributing to the value or disvalue of ambition.³³ However, the picture I have sketched differs from Aristotle's in some important respects.

The most interesting and complicated questions about ambition's normative status arise when one or another of the value factors is deficient, even though the others are present. If its object is good and rightly seen, its pursuit is meaningful, and it leads via appropriate means to a good outcome, but a significant portion of its motivation is derived from a fear of failure, is it a virtue? If its pursuit is meaningful, is motivated by an appreciation for the value of its object, and leads via appropriate means to a good outcome, but its object is not especially good, is it a virtue? In sorting out these questions, Aristotle's image of the virtues as a mean between two extremes is not particularly helpful.³⁴ For there are at least a dozen extremes, and a

³² For an analysis of Aristotle's view, see Dombrowski (1989) pp. 132-5.

³³ Aristotle (1939) 1125b2-3.

³⁴ That is not to say that the Aristotelian lacks resources to sort out such cases. It is just to say that the idea of the mean is not very useful for so doing. However, rather than being a reason to reject the Aristotelian account of the virtues, my point could be taken to reinforce that account by highlighting the importance of practical wisdom for assessing whether a trait is a virtue or a vice.

person's ambition may be at the mean with respect to some but not with respect to others. With regard to many of these less than perfectly virtuous ambitions, the virtuous observer shall be inclined to approve of them, on the whole. There may be more of value than disvalue in these mixed cases, often quite a bit more. In such cases the virtuous agent may approve of the trait at the same time that she recognizes its imperfections.

A second important difference between this account and Aristotle's stems from its attention to ambition's role in structuring a meaningful life. Because meaning and direction are partially constitutive of the good life, by providing meaning and direction, ambition contributes to the good life. It may serve this function even when ambition's object is not especially valuable if it helps an agent construct a meaningful life who might otherwise not enjoy one. Consequently, contra Aristotle, I am suggesting that by giving structure to a life ambition may be a virtue even if it is not directed toward "the right object for the right purpose."³⁵ Given the value it makes possible, the virtuous agent might approve of an ambition in the life of another that she would not approve in herself (perhaps because of her ambition to be an ideally virtuous agent).

Ambition is not alone in its ability to give structure to a life. Love can also serve in this role, as can patriotism and vengefulness, to name just a few. This observation sheds light on part of what made Machiavelli's, Harrington's, Locke's and Rousseau's worries about ambition plausible. Its ability to imbue a life with structure and meaning allows ambition to compete with and, at times, overshadow the love and/or patriotism on which they believe the state depends. Thus, its ability to

³⁵ Cf. Aristotle (1939) 1106b21-2.

give a life meaning and direction can contribute both to its being a trait the virtuous will approve and to being one they will deplore.

Alongside its provision of meaning, ambition also supplies its own normative frame of reference, and it, too, can contribute both to ambition's virtue and to its viciousness. Ambition provides a framework for deeming certain actions good or bad and for judging oneself to be virtuous or vicious. Within this framework, one's action is good and one's character virtuous when one promotes ambition's ends. One's action is bad and one is vicious when one could have promoted ambition's ends but failed to do so. This frame of reference is rich enough that it has the potential to supplant the moral point of view. When it does, the ambition is prone to becoming vicious.

This danger is not unique to ambition. It also accompanies other virtues. Outside of ambition, the danger is perhaps most noticeable in what is often taken to be the greatest of virtues, viz., love. Love, like ambition, introduces its own set of norms. These include obligations to promote the beloved's interests and to be faithful to her. When these obligations conflict with the demands of justice or temperance or benevolence to others than one's beloved, love can become vicious in two quite different ways. One may willfully ignore or reject these competing demands. Or they may not register in the first place, failing to be seen as normative demands altogether. In the latter sort of case one's departure from morality is not chosen, but it has the potential to be even worse than an intentional disregard for morality. Often what has happened in such a case is that the point of view of love has supplanted the moral point of view. This, it seems to me, is the genuine worry that stands behind Kant's philanthropist example. The worry is not that we may be moved to help another out of love rather than out of an appreciation for the moral law. Rather, the deep worry is

that the normative framework of love can supplant the moral framework. In such a case one can pursue with righteous conviction a course of action that diverges from what virtue would require and be incapable of even seeing, let alone responding to, the latter.

Thus, ambition is double-edged. It can make an important contribution to the well-lived life by providing direction and meaning, by making possible the goods of achievement and the satisfactions that can accompany them. It can introduce a richness to the moral life by supplying a normative framework that encourages creativity, industry, discipline and perseverance. But it also poses the risk that it will edge out other meaningful activities and supplant the moral point of view. Consequently, ambition has the potential to be a crucial virtue as well as a devastating vice.

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