Gavin Wong

Mr. Guse

ENG 4UI

11 November 2022

Ambition for Survival

The ambitions of human beings have always been catalysts for change; the actions taken by every great leader or ingenious inventor were all driven by their own unique goals and dreams. It is these goals and dreams that will shape the future of mankind, a future that seems unfortunately bleak. The actions currently being taken by the human race are sending the entire species barreling off a cliff, built high by the corpses of our fellow man, and into the waiting jaws of a beast named extinction. I had not initially possessed such a pessimistic point of view; however, witnessing current events has led me to reconsider my previous outlook on our collective future. While ambition has played a major role in the development of such an outcome, it may also play an even greater role in its recourse. By analyzing the effects of ambition on humanity, a definite conclusion on both the predicted outcome and its solution can be more accurately determined.

The desire to accomplish a goal can lead one to push their limits or ignore their morals, a topic explored by Madeline Miller in her novel *Circe*. During my group’s first book talk on the novel, we were able to connect the recurring theme of destructive ambition to several real world instances of such. We discussed the impact that the ambitions of billionaires can have on everyday people, and drew similarities to the behaviors and actions of the gods from the novel. *Circe* demonstrates the benefits and consequences of the ambitions on both the ambitious and those around them, as evidenced by the dynamic characterization of Odysseus. When the reader is first introduced to Odysseus, he is characterized by his relentless pursuit to return to Ithaca and his family. He performs great feats of strength and intelligence throughout the Odyssey to accomplish this goal. However, after finally reaching Ithaca, his ambition changes. What once motivated him to become a hero now becomes a lust for conquest and fame that leads him to “[returning] with gold belts and cups and a new breastplate, and splashes of dried blood on his clothes” (307). Madeline Miller is able to effectively convey her message on the power of ambition through her writing. Odysseus’ desire allows him to weather the impossible, but it equally drives him to kill and mistreat the family he longed to return to. The strong narrative, unique setting, and round characterization of this text has allowed me to reflect on the multifaceted nature of ambition, and opened my eyes to the fact that it can be the source of both benevolence and malice. Although ambition holds potential for virtue and vice, a comparison of the two shows that one has a significantly more pronounced impact on the human race than the other.

Unfortunately, even considering all the technological advancements of the 21st century, humanity’s impact on the world and each other remains negative. A modern example of this being Russia’s unprovoked attack on Ukraine. February 24th, 2022, Russia launched its offensive, attacking the capital, Kyiv, to overthrow the current president and overturn its government. In a destructive showcase of the potential of human ambition, the Russian invasion displaced thousands of lives and snuffed out just as many. This invasion was not exclusively damaging to those involved in the war either, since as history has shown, wars frequently impact other countries regardless of their participation. As a large exporter of grain, Ukraine’s contributions were critical to the global food economy and the fight against famines in third-world countries. Russia’s attack promptly halted any aid being sent out, leaving the populations of countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya on the verge of starvation, and global food prices on the rise. The Russian government's desire for power and influence was able to reduce the overall quality of life across the globe. The destruction of entire countries appears to be nothing but a few conflicts away, and even those seem more likely by the day thanks to our planet's rapidly dwindling resources. This fragile state of the world begets the question of what we can do to fix it, instinct dictating we eliminate the problem at its source. However, before attempting to cut out such an integral part of the human psyche, it is critical to consider whether or not ambition is wholly to blame.

Ambition isn’t necessarily evil on its lonesome; it will continue to inspire people to pursue their goals regardless of what the intent of said goal is. The consequences of ambition are brought about by human nature, and removing its potential benefits would only serve to our detriment. This isn’t to say that it holds no sway over our actions, considering the ambitious will often resort to less-than-humane tactics to achieve their goals. Such tactics are employed because humans frequently value themselves more highly than those around them, and as put by Joseph Brodsky in his speech “A Commencement Address”: “evil takes root when one man starts to think he is better than another” (Brodsky). When one considers themselves better than others, it creates justification for actions against those viewed as inferior. A sense of superiority, as opposed to ambition, is what has enabled horrific practices such as human trafficking, slavery, and systemic racism to take place, sacrificing the unfortunate for the profit of others. If humanity would commit such atrocities without provocation, waning supplies of food and water could very well see the destruction of our world via similar behavior replicated in mass. In this sense, ambition serves as fuel to a destructive fire by empowering humanity’s inherent evil. Overcoming this evil would require a clean slate, since currently “the slate is dark with dirt, and it is hard to believe in either [our] ability or [our] will to clean it” (Brodsky). Brodsky all but declares it impossible for humanity to remove this evil of its own free will; humans are too invested in their own success to consider making any changes in their behavior. While mankind cannot change itself, perhaps there is salvation to be found in its own evil-free creations.

Jeannette Winterson makes a profound statement on the future of humanity in her Ted Talk “Is humanity smart enough to survive itself?”. She describes a future in which humanity passes on its will to a digital successor in “alternative intelligence”(5:26), a new species absent of all the faults of its creators. She states that one of humanity's greatest flaws is its “obsses[ion] with false binaries”(8:07), and how they create a sense of othering. When dividing by human binaries such as gender, race, sexuality, or class, it becomes much more simple to distance oneself from the half least familiar. That separation has always been problematic due to the ease with which humans are willing to sacrifice or even loathe those dissimilar or “inferior” to them. This can be seen prominently throughout the European colonization of Canada stretching from the 17th century to the present. The Canadian government put countless nigh-genocidal practices into effect against the Indigenous communities around Canada, all because they were on the opposite end of a binary. Winterson's proposal would completely eliminate this destructive outlet of ambition; AI would not have the greed to kill and violate the rights of others, being “Buddhist in its non-needs”(8:56). Removing the innate evil of humanity would allow the new humanity to fully utilize the potential of ambition to thrive on the earth we’ve destroyed. However, this future is not set in stone just yet. As critical as determining the error of our ways is, it is equally important to work towards creating a better future.

Ambition has been and remains a critical factor in the individual and collective futures of humanity. Its influence is not unlike the passage of time, constantly marching people forward toward their goals. Human evil corrupts this drive, causing men to trample over the well-being of others to sprint to their desires instead of march. These sacrifices will repeat cyclically until, whether by atomic bombs, starvation, or pandemic, we fly off the cliff. And while we would supposedly live on through AI, without the individuality that comes with our faults, could that species truly be considered human at all? Humanity should not collectively give up on itself and dedicate its remaining days to working toward creating a final impression on our planet. If ambition has brought humanity this far, shouldn’t we be able to utilize it to save ourselves? Our salvation, much like our destruction, will boil down to our collective dreams and the actions they inspire. Ambition may have a negative impact on humanity for the foreseeable future, but it rests on the people of today to change this future.

Works Cited

Brodsky, Joseph. *A Commencement Address* | Williams College, 1984.

Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. “First Nations in Canada.” *Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada*, 2 May 2017, www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1307460755710/1536862806124.

“Ukraine War: What Are the Impacts on the World Today?” *The IRC*, 23 Aug. 2022, www.rescue.org/article/ukraine-war-what-are-impacts-world-today#:~:text=Millions%20of%20civilians%20are%20unable,the%20world's%20most%20vulnerable%20regions.

Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 10 April 2018.

Winterson, Jeanette. “Is Humanity Smart Enough to Survive Itself?” *Jeanette Winterson: Is Humanity Smart Enough to Survive Itself? | TED Talk*, TED, 2022, www.ted.com/talks/jeanette\_winterson\_is\_humanity\_smart\_enough\_to\_survive\_itself.