Aspiration in Adam Smith's Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

Adam Smith's moral theory is widely recognized as virtue ethical in its framework. Such frameworks have at their core a specific kind of aspirational desire: the desire to understand and to continue improving that belongs to those individuals who are already meaningfully on the road to virtue. It is a desire for virtue informed by, and continuously transformed by, ever-increasing clarity about the nature of virtue. This paper seeks out this specifically virtue ethical type of aspiration in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Unlike other projects that have sought out aspiration in Smith as the desire to escape parochial values, my argument seeks a more stringent and specific standard, and aims to clarify Smith's place in the virtue ethical tradition.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics, Adam Smith, aspiration, impartial spectator

> The wise seek the virtues with nature's guidance, while people who are imperfect but endowed with outstanding abilities are often motivated by honour, which has the appearance and image of morality. Morality itself, though, is in every way perfect and complete, a single object of absolute splendour, the most glorious of all things. If only they could gaze upon it directly, how joyously these people would embrace it, given the delight they take in a shadowy impression!

- Cicero, *On Moral Ends* V.69[1]

1. Introduction

The characterization of Adam Smith as a virtue ethicist is not without controversy. Though virtue is undeniably present and prominent in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the part that examines virtue most closely—Part VI, entitled "Of the Character of Virtue"—was added by Smith only in the final version and, so it may be thought, as a remnant of his moral theory rather than its starting point. Many scholars embrace Smith's preoccupation with clarifying his conception of virtue in that part of the text as a sign that he is consciously perpetuating the virtue ethical program of the ancients.[2] Others take the account of virtue to be sufficiently peripheral to his moral theory that they can reconstruct his view with little reference to it at all.[3] Still others argue that Smith self-consciously seeks to reconcile ancient and modern ethical sensibilities with the result that he cannot be neatly categorized.[4]

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[1] This translation of Cicero is from Raphael Woolf, edited by Julia Annas (Cicero 2017). As this paper will show, I owe much of my thinking about virtue ethics to Julia Annas. I am grateful for her mentorship and for her encouragement of this project. Thanks also to Emily Hulme and Jeremy Reid, and to a particularly rousing audience at the 2023 International Adam Smith Society meeting in St. Andrews. Nir Ben-Moshe, Chapin Cimino, and Christel Fricke were especially helpful in that session. Most of all, thanks to Doug Den Uyl for multiple rounds of constructive feedback.

[2] See McCloskey (2008, p. 52) who argues that Smith "was building an ethic for a commercial society, but on the foundation of ethical thought in the West." Montes (2003, p. 57) recognizes that Smith does not merely rely on the tradition to fill out the center of his moral theory, but that he develops a virtue theory his own. See Hanley (2009, p. 6) for an account of Smith's "synthesis" of ancient and Christian virtue traditions under the principal concept of self-love.

[3] See, for example, Fleischacker (2021) who rejects the scholarly view that the normative project of TMS VI is the center of the moral theory, arguing that it is subordinate to the theory of the impartial spectator. Indeed, Fleischacker (2020) is emphatic that Smith is, on balance, more virtue ethical than rule-based or consequentialist, but "nevertheless, he tries to incorporate some of the intuitions that generated these other systems." Schliesser (2017, pp. 225–234) also devotes scant space to discussion of virtue in his treatment of Smith's expansive "systematicity," and draws the conclusion that "realistic" exemplars are described all along in the TMS, rendering Part VI a continuation rather than a special insight of the text.

[4] Carrasco (2014, p. 225), for example, argues that Smith "configures an ethical framework that makes space for both ideals of excellence and Modern imperatives." Many have observed Smith's ambition to update ancient theories of virtue to fit his modern, commercial world and to accommodate the ideals of liberalism, e.g. Darwall (1999), Griswold (1999), Vivenza (2001), Winch (1978).

What decides whether a moral theory is virtual ethical? This is the question that stands prior to any effort at categorizing Smith's theory, and it is nearly intractable due to the variations observed in virtue ethical theories both ancient and modern. Even where the ancient philosophical schools agreed about the centrality of virtue in the good life, they disagreed about both the nature of virtue and how many virtues there are. Plato thought there were four cardinal virtues (at least, that is the view presented in the *Republic*, but we should wonder at the importance of piety in *Euthyphro*), while Aristotle generates a taxonomy of intellectual and character virtues that enumerates perhaps twelve character virtues, or maybe eleven, and five intellectual virtues, but maybe only two really count.[5] The Stoics introduced further variation when they reduced all excellence to a single virtue: the perfection of reason.[6] Perhaps surprisingly, even those hedonistic Epicureans were committed virtue ethicists, differing from the other philosophical schools only by way of conceiving of virtue as a *means* rather than an end of the good life.[7] These few examples demonstrate that we cannot look to the list of virtues in a given moral theory to determine its virtue ethical bonafides, nor to the way virtue figures as means or end or necessary or otherwise.

What all virtue ethical theories do have in common, however, is a special kind of aspiration that marks the virtuous world view. That is, virtue ethics is premised on the idea that virtue endows individuals with a particular way of understanding and valuing the world and their relationship to it. It is the perspective marked by Cicero in the epigraph to this paper: the

[5] The intellectual virtues might be identified with the five "states by which the soul tracks truth" enumerated in *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) 6.3, but among those *phronesis* and *sophia* are identified as the exclusive province of happiness (*NE* 10.7–8). The character virtues are discussed across *NE* Books 2–5. Doris (1998, p. 508) counts twelve of them and, strangely, eight intellectual ones. Alighieri (1909, pp. IV. xvii, 4–8) had counted only eleven character virtues.

[6] Brennan (2015, pp. 37–38) presents the textual evidence for this interpretation.

[7] Shaw and Robitzsch (2024) show that, for Epicurus, "the pleasant life requires virtue, and indeed is guaranteed by it." So virtue is not only a means, but a *necessary* means to the good life.

joyous direct gaze upon morality and corresponding seeking of virtue with nature as guide.[8] This value-orientation varies from one system to the next in its substance—certainly the virtuous Epicurean does not value what the Stoic Sage values—but what is common to all is that it fundamentally involves aspiring to something distinct from and better than one's existing moral dispositions and circumstances. Virtue makes people desire what is really good and to be it, and any system of ethics that does not or cannot hold space for this special kind of aspiration ought not to be considered virtue ethical. Without it, Adam Smith's moral theory will not be a virtue ethics either.

Prima facie, it is easy to locate this desire in Smith's theory. When he says that "man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely," Smith identifies a psychological mechanism by which we seek real moral correctness, beyond mere appearance (TMS III.ii.1). "He desires," Smith continues, "not only praise, but praise-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise" (TMS III.ii.1). Many scholars have made this notion of loving praiseworthiness the touchstone of aspiration in Smith's work.[9] But others have doubted the power of a desire "to be really fit" to propel individuals beyond parochial moral values and viewpoints (TMS III.ii.6; 117). This suspicion is stirred by the fact that Smith anchors our desire to be good to the examples of excellence that we directly observe in our communities.

> The love and admiration which we naturally conceive for those whose character and conduct we approve of, necessarily dispose us to desire to become ourselves the objects of the like agreeable sentiments, and to be as amiable and as

[8] It is worth noting Smith's familiarity with Cicero's *De Finibus*, as attested by Vivenza (2001, pp. 1–7).

[9] Hanley (2009, p. 146), for example, describes praiseworthiness as the natural psychological mechanism by which a "transethical horizon" is conceived. See also Carrasco (2014, pp. 229–230), Griswold (1999, p. 132), Forman-Barzilai (2010, p. 99) and McHugh (2022, pp. 113–117).

> admirable as those whom we love and admire the most. Emulation, the anxious desire that we ourselves should excel, is originally found in our admiration of the excellence of others. We must at least believe ourselves to be admirable for what they are admirable. (III.ii.3; 114).

If it is the living embodiment of moral excellence that fully informs our conception of virtue and its desirability, then we will be limited in our moral aspirations to that degree of excellence exhibited in the examples we admire.[10]

This complaint is both well-founded and serious. The former because Smith does conceive of morality as being generated by a process of reciprocal sympathetic responses that is intersubjective and renders morality "a matter of socialization."[11] And the latter because Smith's theory of virtue and concomitant virtue ethics suffers from an underpowered account of aspiration.

The task of defending Smith's program against the charge of parochialism has rightly sustained attention among scholars, then.[12] In my view, to show that his moral theory, inclusive of the sentimentalist psychology, can accommodate a kind of moral aspiration that escapes

[10] Forman-Barzilai (2010) wages the most sophisticated version of this argument. Arguments to this conclusion often appeal to Smith's conception of the impartial spectator, charging that the impartial spectator is necessarily "closed" (Golemboski 2020, p. 9) or equilibrated to a local standard of common sense (Fleischacker 2011, p. 27), or else that for any moral agent—even the "wise and virtuous"—"absolute certainty in moral matters is not possible," so that even a cosmopolitan achievement must be tempered with humility (Fricke 2013, p. 198). Additionally, Smith adopts a Humean conception of imagination, according to which we are limited, in both our scientific and moral exercise of imagination, to the simple ideas and sense perceptions with which we are already familiar (Harrison 1995; Haakonssen 2002; Hankins and McDavid 2023). This means our moral imagination is limited.

[11] Berry 1992, p. 80. This intersubjectivity is what Hanley (2009, pp. 145–146) conceives facilitating that love of praiseworthiness and magnanimity that gives rise to the "transethical horizon," mentioned above, rather than toward ever worsening corruption in a pursuit of unenlightened praise. In other words, moral development conceived as a process of socialization need not tether the individual to local norms and expectations. But Hanley's treatment itself discloses the work to be done in showing how the transcendence is possible.

[12] McHugh 2020 offers a persuasive defense in this vein and nicely summarizes the development of the debate in scholarship.

parochialism is to rescue the moral theory. That rescue has been adequately executed, I think, and a rest from contest is well-deserved by defenders. But, also in my view, a different specter of inadequate aspiration has been looming just beyond the gaze of scholars. Smith's fully developed moral agent may rise to a "transethical horizon" unbound by the parochial sentiments of his fellows, but can he find himself reoriented specifically by the values proper to the virtuous world view? That is, can Smith's moral theory make sense of the distinctively virtue ethical kind of aspiration?

The present study proposes to conduct a test for determining Smith's virtue ethical commitments. The test is perhaps simple in scope: to discern a particular type of aspiration in his work, namely the aspiration characteristic of virtue. But first the test itself must be shown to be revelatory. Thus, in §2, I begin with documenting that this "aspiration of virtue" is indispensable to any program in virtue ethics that is worth the name. In §3, I turn to the hard work of looking into Smith's texts for the purpose to carrying out the test. Many scholars have denied that aspiration can be accommodated by a theory that describes human beings as bound by sympathy, desire for approval, and an imaginative power that is itself limited to the finite range of our experiences. Smith's moral theory seems to be poor soil for the aspiration of virtue, then, and a poor candidate for a virtue ethics. In §4, I argue that the very particular brand of longing-for-something-greater that marks the moral exemplars of ancient ethics is discernible in Smith, and in §5 I briefly consider an objection. My verdict is that his ethics is a virtue ethics.

2. Aspiration in virtue ethics

Virtue ethical theories posit a particular kind of aspiration that is the exclusive province of virtue. It bears a likeness to Smith's concept of the desire "to be really fit," but whereas that desire is common, virtue ethical aspiration is exceptional. Only individuals possessed of some

genuine understanding of what it is to be really fit are in a position to aspire to fitness in the virtuous way, i.e. to desire it for what it is. It is one thing to have a raw—that is, uneducated—and perhaps innate impulse to be an authentic version of what wins praise, but it is quite another to set clear eyes on that object, to understand the difficulties and costs of achieving it, and to strive for it with not less, but greater passion. It is this informed, purposive, and more inflamed drive to attain virtue that constitutes moral aspiration in history's great virtue ethical programs.

For Aristotle, individuals are ready for serious ethical reasoning only once they have acquired what he calls the "starting points" of ethics (*NE* 1.3). These are "good habits," the propensities to take pleasure in right things, pain in wrong, and basically to believe of good things that they are good and of bad things that they are bad.[13] These beliefs and dispositions are not inborn, but are acquired via habituation, Aristotle explains (*NE* 2.1). Moral development requires not just an initial dispositional orientation to the good, but a trained and acquired orientation that transforms our basic desires and becomes the compelling reason to make further progress.

In Stoicism, too, motivation to pursue virtue and to mold oneself in likeness to the Sage is derived from rational understanding of what is good, bad, and indifferent to our flourishing. We develop, the Stoics argue, via a process called *oikeiosis* that naturally orients us, from birth through to adulthood, toward what is proper to us and necessary for our self-preservation.[14]

[13] Aristotle (2014, 1.4). See Burnyeat 1980 for examination of Aristotle's reasons for setting this pre-requisite.

[14] Klein (2016, p. 149) translates *oikeiosis* as "appropriation" and explains that "appropriate action," for the Stoics, is "achieved by human agents through a cognitive grasp of one's own constitution and through the perfection of the faculty on which this grasp depends." There are many difficulties of interpretation surrounding the Stoic theory of *oikeiosis*, as surveyed and navigated thoroughly by Klein, but I agree with Klein's understanding that "in rational agents the character of impulse is conditioned by the discursive and inferential abilities that underwrite higher-order modes of phantasia and, crucially, by the capacity to pass judgment on phantasiai" (194). The advent of reason subordinates impulse and enables the individual to lead their life rationally. Cooper (1995, p. 593) states this elegantly: "The final state is reached when, reflecting upon what one has been doing while acting for these earlier reasons, one comes to realize that merely acting that way has tremendous appeal, that it is a mistake to think of the value of so acting in any given instance as derivative from–needed because of its presumed efficacy in achieving–the assumed value to oneself of the continuance of one's constitution or of getting whatever it was one was then acting appropriately so as to get. Such action is then seen

Orientation to virtue is not set at birth, though. It requires the development of rational capacities that, once possessed, enable us to make purposive movement toward wisdom and virtue. Reason endows us with the ability to aspire, and as we exercise reason and increase our understanding, we aspire all the more.

Modern iterations of virtue ethics, indebted as they are to the Aristotelian and Stoic models, prominently feature this specifically virtue ethical aspiration. McDowell, in arguing that moral development delivers us to special appreciation of what is salient in ethical situations, proposes that "it is highly implausible that all the concerns which motivate virtuous actions are intelligible, one by one, independently of appreciating a virtuous person's distinctive way of seeing situations."[15] The motivations of virtuous persons are inaccessible from outside the virtuous perspective. For McDowell, the "concerns which motivate" are most of all derived from "perceptions of saliences," i.e. the recognition that particular details of a situation count as reasons for acting in a certain way in response.[16] If virtue consists primarily in being sensitive to saliences as reasons, then virtue fosters a unique aspiration by giving the virtuous person unique insight into why such sensitivity is desirable. She desires it strongly because she understands the value of desiring it.

Julia Annas, in building her profile of the virtuous person, conveys a similar notion of global transformation when she says of her conception of virtue that it "gives a life what we can call a positive directionality."[17]

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as having an intrinsic value of its own, consisting in the fact that it is reason-directed action, where what is done is 'appropriate' because it fits in with one's natural needs."

[15] McDowell (1979, p. 346).

[16] McDowell (ibid., p. 346). Lacking an economical expression for these ideas in English, he says in *Mind and World* that the German *Bildung* captures the idea (McDowell 1996, p. 84)

[17] Annas (2011, p. 117).

> The life is pointed in a positive direction by the fact that the aims and values the person pursues form a whole which is marked by absence of conflict and increasing cooperation of the sources of energy. This is not like the kind of direction given to a life by the exclusive pursuit of money, say, or of fame. The kind of direction given to a life by virtue is a direction of overall aim in the *way the life is lived*—in the aim to live well, to live a good life—not a direction given by a specific objective such as wealth or fame, which can be pursued either virtuously or viciously.[18]

What makes the virtuous person proceed along this positive direction is what Annas calls the "drive to aspire," which comprises three desires: (i) the need to understand, (ii) the desire to be self-directing, and (iii) the eagerness to improve.[19] The drive to aspire belongs to the "learner," Annas says. But it is clear also that the person possessed of these elements of aspiration is someone already meaningfully on the road, not the person who is deciding whether to pursue wealth or fame or else the life of virtue. The drive to aspire is a uniquely virtuous aspiration.[20]

With these examples from the history of virtue ethics in mind, I propose that we ought to investigate Adam Smith for signs of a similar commitment to virtue's transformational

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[18] Annas (2011, p. 117), emphasis is hers. She concedes that this positive directionality is a feature of her account of virtue, but "not all accounts, nor even [...] all the ones in which virtue is committed to goodness" (117). But hers is a compelling and attractive account that returns virtue ethics to its more ancient form through emphasis on virtue's likeness to skill and its cognitive resources in understanding not only that something is good, but why.

[19] Annas (ibid., pp. 17–18)

[20] Callard (2018, p. 8) offers a complex analysis of aspiration as "rational, purposive value acquisition." The process requires work, Callard argues. "The aspirant sees that she does not have the values that she would like to have, and therefore seeks to move herself toward a better valuational condition" (5). Callard is motivated by the version of Meno's paradox that resides at the heart of this situation: How can we desire to value what we do not value? And, interestingly, she does not engage with virtue ethics as a special iteration of the phenomenon. It is unclear how she would apply her model. Because she places aspiration prior to value acquisition, she could deny that aspiration belongs to the person who has already acquired virtue. But I think her puzzle persists throughout the life of the virtuous person, for virtue is excellence in one's condition (cognitive or emotional or both), and the virtuous person goes on desiring always to be more excellent, assuming that the virtuous person is always in some sense a learner.

power. Does Smith conceive of virtue as the virtue ethicists do, as not only a disposition to be good, but also as founding a unique value-orientation and aspiration to become better?

3. Identifying aspiration in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

We see the materials of an account of aspiration in multiple and disjoint passages in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The *locus classicus* and by far most often appealed to is the TMS III distinction, referred to in my introduction above, between the "love of praise" and the "love of praiseworthiness."

> Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love. He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of hatred. He desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise. He dreads, not only blame, but blame-worthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be blamed by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of blame. (TMS III.ii.1; 113)

Scholars have recognized that Smith appears to be responding to Mandeville with this observation.[21] Where Mandeville had provocatively and cynically asserted that human beings are motivated in all their actions by either vanity or a desire to win approval and praise, Smith counters that people are sensitive to the distinction between mere praise and praiseworthiness and that the "love of praise seems, at least in a great measure, to be derived from that of

[21] For example, Den Uyl and Griswold (1996, p. 619) and Hanley (2009, p. 99).

praiseworthiness" (TMS III.ii.3; 114). By endowing human beings with this "distinct and independent" principle of action, nature has equipped us with a capacity to pursue virtue for its own sake, rather than as a means to other ends.[22]

This love of praiseworthiness is recognized by Smith as belonging to us by nature. He must have in mind that we are possessed of an innate or at least intuitive sense of the difference between the condition of receiving praise and the condition of being worthy.[22] This is not yet to say that we possess any innate conception of the substance of such conditions, however. We arrive at moral beliefs, on Smith's view, through social interactions.[23] But the desires that direct us through those interactions are nevertheless minted in two kinds: the desire to secure approval, which desire will come to be informed by understanding of what in fact secures such approval, and the desire to be worthy of approval, which desire will—or *can*—also come to be informed by understanding of what *in fact* is so worthy.

In marking these two fundamental desires apart, Smith has not yet isolated a uniquely virtue ethical form of aspiration for two reasons, then: (1) the love of praiseworthiness belongs to everyone by nature, which precludes the possibility that it is a characteristic of excellence, and (2) the love of praiseworthiness itself lacks the content that is definitive of virtue ethical aspiration, namely, the accounts of what is and what is not in fact worthy.[24] Nonetheless, the love of praiseworthiness must be the psychological capacity upon which aspiration is built. Specifically, this desire is a match for Aristotle's conception of a natural orientation to the good

[22] Den Uyl and Griswold (1996, p. 619) show that valuing virtue "for its own sake" is possible only through seeking the approval of the impartial spectator since worthiness must be measured not against what is actually praised but only against what we imagine could be approved by well-informed and just judge. I will return to this idea of "for its own sake" striving in Section 4, where I raise the issue that Smith's emphasis on the impartial spectator as a tool for self-assessment presents a difficulty for locating a pure for-its-own-sake motivation even in the people he identifies as "wise and virtuous."

[23] McHugh (2022) explores the workings of the natural insight.

[24] Brown (2012) examines the "intersubjectivity" and dependency on social interactions in Smith's theory of moral belief, referred to also in Berry (1992) and Hanley (2009).

(a potentiality) that stands in need of actualization before it can be correctly described as good in itself.[25] The aspiration we are looking for is the informed and transformed capacity for desiring to be worthy, for that is the virtue ethical aspiration shaped by a value-orientation accessible only from *inside* the virtuous condition. These other desires are available outside of that condition.

There are two other passages in which Smith asserts distinctions that are *prima facie* similar to the love of praise and of praiseworthiness distinction. The first is in TMS I, where he identifies "two different characters" of success:

> To deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind, are the great objects of ambition and emulation. Two different roads are presented to us, equally leading to the attainment of this so much desired object; the one, by the study of wisdom and the practice of virtue; the other, by the acquisition of wealth and greatness. Two different characters are presented to our emulation; the one, of proud ambition and ostentatious avidity. the other, of humble modesty and equitable justice. Two different models, two different pictures, are held out to us, according to which we may fashion our own character and behaviour. (TMS I.iii.3.2)

These "two different models, two different pictures" are, unlike the two fundamental desires discussed above, substantial and content-filled. The two models perform the same function as

[25] For the first of these points, see Smith's declaration that "virtue is excellence, something uncommonly great and beautiful, which rises far above what is vulgar and ordinary" (TMS I.i.5.6). See Forman-Barzilai (2010, pp. 111–112) for discussion of this passage in particular, and Darwall (1999) and Fleischacker (2004, p. 141) for discussion of an egalitarianism in Smith, which egalitarianism describes the universal predication of the desire for praiseworthiness and capacity for virtue, but not of realized virtue.

one another: presenting somewhat determinate "models" according to which we can "fashion our own character." They are distinct insofar as they attain to widely different values, the one to wisdom and virtue and the other to worldly success.

The second passage asserting a similar distinction occurs in TMS VI, which is understood to contain and represent Smith's final reflections on moral theory and, therefore, to represent his considered view.[26]

> In estimating our own merit, in judging of our own character and conduct, there are two different standards to which we naturally compare them. The one is the idea of exact propriety and perfection, so far as we are each of us capable of comprehending that idea. The other is that degree of approximation to this idea which is commonly attained in the world, and which the greater part of our friends and companions, of our rivals and competitors, may have actually arrived at. We very seldom (I am disposed to think, we never) attempt to judge of ourselves without giving more or less attention to both these different standards. But the attention of different men, and even of the same man at different times, is often very unequally divided between them; and is sometimes principally directed towards the one, and sometimes towards the other. (TMS VI.iii.23; 247)

Here Smith draws out "two different standards" for self-assessment. Perhaps these are also "models" for fashioning our character and conduct, as the "two different characters" of TMS I

[26] Aristotle distinguishes potentiality from actuality in the Metaphysics: "the excellent activity is better and more honorable than the potentiality" (Met. 1051a). See Baker (2017) for discussion of Aristotle's conception of human orientation to goodness. Human beings have a natural or inborn potential for goodness insofar as we are capable of becoming good, but we are not good by nature in actuality (see NE 2.1).

are, but Smith is interested here in accounting for the process of exercising "judg[ment] of ourselves" much more than the process of forming our characters.[27]

Now, when we take all three of these distinctions together—the two fundamental desires (TMS III), the two different characters (TMS I), and two different standards (TMS VI)—we might initially think that they offer pairwise comparisons reducible to one another. Because all three mark out a propensity to reach for moral excellence, it might seem that an orientation toward moral excellence—conceived as moral aspiration—is being contrasted with a non-aspirational orientation or at least a non-moral aspiration. After all, the love of praiseworthiness, the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, and the comparison of self to "exact propriety and perfection" appear to coincide.

But the claims of these texts defy reduction for two reasons: First, the "two different models, two different pictures" of TMS I and the "two different standards" of TMS VI are each and all counted as praiseworthy. The model of wisdom and virtue contrasts with the model of worldly riches not because the former is praiseworthy while the latter is merely praised, but because they are "equal" by quite "different roads" to deserving—and acquiring, and enjoying— the admiration of our fellows. Likewise, the standard of perfect propriety contrasts with the "degree of approximation [...] commonly attained in the world" not because the former is praiseworthy while the latter is merely praised, but because one is an unachievable—by Smith's lights—ideal while the other is an achievable—and commonly achieved—non-ideal. These distinctions cannot be reduced to the distinction between love of praise and praiseworthiness, then.

[27] Of course, these two processes are only conceptually distinct in Smith's theory, for the process by which we fine-tune our judgments just is the process by which we sculpt our character and conduct. But it is worthwhile to avoid collapsing the conceptual distinctions in the text in order to avoid unwarranted reductions.

Second, pertaining particularly to the TMS VI distinction, Smith recognizes that "we very seldom (I am disposed to think, we never) attempt to judge of ourselves without giving more or less attention to both these different standards," but "the wise and virtuous man directs his principal attention to the first standard" (VI.iii.23 and 25).[28] Smith here is saying that we consult both standards in each instance of judgment, which entails that they are not appealed to one at a time, dependent upon the dimension of life—whether moral or worldly— that is under scrutiny. Rather, he sets out two standards that are consulted in judgment of ourselves in relation to the same dimension, and it is clear from the mention of perfect propriety and the wise man's inclination to prioritize that standard, that the dimension in question is moral. There is complexity in our conception of success in the moral domain, Smith observes. We consult two different standards, in accordance with ideal and non-ideal expectations. But both standards are moral standards, and both standards are informed by models of moral excellence, i.e. the first of the "two different characters" in the TMS I distinction.

This reveals that it is moral aspiration itself that is differentiated in TMS VI rather than only *aspirational* motivation from *nonaspirational* motivation. Indeed, we can see now that there are three very different distinctions being made across these passages: the first alone marks out *nonaspirational* desire from aspirational desire; the second distinguishes moral aspiration from secular or worldly aspiration; and the third dissects moral aspiration itself and differentiates it. For this reason, I believe the TMS VI passage is the choicest of these texts for considering Smith's conception of aspiration and his theory's ability to accommodate a particularly virtue ethical aspiration. If virtuous aspiration is to be found anywhere, it is here in the longing for perfect propriety.

[28] See Carrasco (2004, p. 109) who analyzes the first standard by taking up the question "what is this 'archetype of perfection' that the moral elite tend to emulate?" Carrasco argues persuasively that the standard attracts the virtuous person "as a final cause" (in the Aristotelian sense) and grounds their pursuit of happiness (ibid., p. 109).

4. Standards of moral aspiration

I have argued that there are several kinds of aspiration on display in Smith's moral theory but that the aspiration to perfect propriety is the most likely site of virtue ethical aspiration. After all, Smith does say that "the wise and virtuous man directs his principal attention to the first standard" (VI.iii.25). But the issue of isolating the particular aspiration of virtue ethics is not a simple matter of picking out the target that is ("principally") aimed at by the virtuous person. The aiming must also take a certain form: the standard of perfect propriety must be desired in a way that motivates deeply transformative self-improvement. It must shift the value-orientation of the aspirant and give her access to moral reasons and understanding that are unavailable to her from outside that perspective. Recall that Annas analyzes the relevant motivation—what she calls the "drive to aspire"—into three elements: (i) the need to understand, (ii) the desire to be self-directing, and (iii) the eagerness to improve. If Smith's wise and virtuous person is possessed of this kind of motivation, then we will have located virtue ethical aspiration in his theory.

The issue is not straight-forward. We may infer that Smith's "wise and virtuous man" exhibits these characteristics of aspiration through the direction of attention to the perfect propriety, for such direction of attention would seem to constitute all dimensions of a drive to aspire. But we must make this picture of directed attention comply with the dimension of Smith's ethics that tethers moral motivation to the judgment of the impartial spectator. Smith introduces the concept of the impartial spectator in Part III of the TMS, where he aims to account for the "origin and foundation" of our judgments of our own conduct and sentiments (III.1.1). We judge the conduct of others in accordance with our ability to sympathize with the sentiments we imagine motivated the conduct, so we judge our own conduct by imaginatively

positing an observer of ourselves and consulting their sympathy or lack of sympathy with our sentiments (III.1.2). This imagined judge is "impartial" in the sense that he does not have any personal stake in the sentiments or conduct under judgment, but we ourselves are scarcely impartial about being judged favorably. We are anxious to win his approval—even more than we are anxious to win the approval of our fellows, for we imagine this impartial spectator to be fair and good so that our desire to be praiseworthy is inflamed through consulting his judgment. Thus, through the mechanism of imagining the judgment of this impartial spectator, we are able to abstract away from our personal stake in an issue in order to exercise disinterested self-evaluation even while being motivated to win a favorable evaluation.[29]

These two dimensions of Smith's theory—the standard of perfect propriety and the judgment of the impartial spectator—are difficult to reconcile. The first is a normative ideal that Smith represents as being desirable for its own sake, not for the sake of winning approval. The latter incentivizes modifying conduct and sentiment toward virtue for the sake of winning the impartial spectator's approval, which means that it does not call upon us to desire virtue for its own sake. In other words, they differ precisely in how they motivate us toward virtue, and this difference matters to the project of discerning virtual ethical aspiration in Smith's theory because such aspiration is definitively powered by a "for its own sake" motivation. The person on the path to virtue has unique access to reasons that cast virtue as a final good.

Den Uyl and Griswold (1996) envision reconciliation of approval-seeking and "for its own sake" valuing when they argue that it is through imagining the judgment of an impartial

[29] Hanley (2009, p. 136), in introducing the impartial spectator, says that "the intention of this mechanism is to enable the person concerned to become a self-spectator and thereby promote the development of conscience." The "self-spectator" notion may seem at odds with the objective of impartiality, but Hanley explains that the development is one in learning to "transcend self-preference" (ibid., p. 136). Forman-Barzilai (2010, p. 166) says that Smith invokes the faculty to "overcome the near-sightedness of our passive sentiments." Griswold (1999, 144, emphasis in the original) says that it "*defines* the moral point of view already latent in ordinary life." The tethering of moral motivation to the spectator can be observed even among these subtle differences of emphasis.

spectator that we can conceive of virtue as an end in itself. “If we are moved by the desire to be praiseworthy, and praiseworthiness is determined by the motives or forms of conduct sanctioned by the impartial spectator, then we can pursue moral virtue for its own sake” (ibid., p. 619). In desiring to be lovely and genuinely *worthy* of praise, we are desiring something distinct from actual praise. But it is through the idea of an impartial spectator, generated from the desire for approval, that we are able to conceive any praiseworthiness distinct from actual praise in the first place. So “for its own sake” valuing is derived from approval-seeking in our moral development.

This solution merits consideration for many reasons, not least that it traces a developmental account that sits well with Smith’s moral theorizing. But it falters through locating the “for its own sake” valuing in the desire for praiseworthiness. If the argument in my previous section is right, then the desire for praiseworthiness is both too common and too contentless to be the locus of virtue ethical aspiration. The content supplied by the exercise of positing and consulting the impartial spectator is distinct from the bare desire for praiseworthiness that belongs to all people “naturally” (TMS III.2.1). We cannot depend on it to carve out a desire belonging uniquely to the excellent outlook, i.e. the virtuous outlook. Thus, if we grant that Den Uyl and Griswold are right that the desire for praiseworthiness delivers us to a ”for its own sake” valuing of virtue, it must be through the downstream activities of actualizing the natural desire and supplying it with content. The desire itself is not yet the aspirational kind of valuing.

Virtue ethical aspiration requires at least the possibility of a pure motivation to be virtuous, unmixed with approval-seeking. But Smith seems at moments to preclude this possibility when he asserts that we are psychologically incapable of engaging in moral judgment in absence of considering the approbation or disapprobation of other judges. “We can

never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them," he says, without consulting what we imagine to be the judgments of others. "Whatever judgment we can form concerning them, accordingly, must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon certain condition, would be, or to what, we imagine, ought to be the judgment of others" (TMS III.1.2). The wise and virtuous person is no exception to this rule.

> He has never dared to suffer the man within the breast to be absent one moment from his attention. With the eyes of this great inmate he has always been accustomed to regard whatever relates to himself. This habit has become perfectly familiar to him. He has been in the constant practice, and, indeed, under the constant necessity, of modelling, or of endeavouring to model, not only his outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as he can, even his inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge. (TMS III.3.25)

Even though the wise and virtuous person is here depicted as depending on his imagination of a fair and impartial judge, not an actual judge, it is nevertheless approbation that is accepted as the moral standard of self-evaluation.

We should observe, of course, that determination of what a wise and just person would approve and the discovery of moral motivation in that determination do not together amount to approval-seeking. Smith need not intend an equivocation like that any more than Aristotle did when he suggested that "an excellent person is distinguished most by his seeing what is true in each case, since he is like a standard and measure" (Aristotle 2014, p. 3.4). We consult what a

virtuous person would do in these circumstances—or imagine how they would judge someone behaving in a given way—and feel motivated to act in accordance with what we discover in the consultation not because we want their approval but because theirs is the virtuous action.[30] To consult the judgments of an imagined wise and fair judge *qua* exemplar of virtue is consistent with a pure motivation, unmixed with approval-seeking. To the extent that Smith might conceive of the approbation of the impartial spectator—or "man within the breast" and "great inmate"—as valued by some people because it particularly indicates the way to virtue, he may have in mind that consultation of moral exemplars stirs aspiration. Indeed, Smith indicates that he is an exemplarist when he says, in the III.3.25 passage quoted at length above, that the wise and virtuous man engages in constant practice of "modelling, or of endeavouring to model, not only his outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as he can, even his inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge."[31]

The problem remains, though, that it is unclear how this moral exemplar fits with the standard of perfect propriety. Consider how Smith describes the standard as an idea whose outlines are "in every man more or less accurately drawn," in accordance with the attentiveness of each man in sketching them, and he exalts the virtuous person for their extraordinary execution of this work.

> In the wise and virtuous man they [the outlines] have been made with the most acute and delicate sensibility, and the utmost care and attention have been

[30] Zagzebski (2004, p. 160) makes the case for this motivational schema in relation to right acts, wrong acts, virtuous acts, and duties. This is a common commitment among exemplarist virtue ethical theories. See Brennan (2015, pp. 44–5) for discussion of the Sage as exemplar in Stoicism.

[31] He reinforces this impression when he calls the standard of perfect propriety a "standard of ideal" at III.iii.27. See Sayre-McCord (2010) for examination of how ideal or otherwise Smith conceives of the impartial spectator. I concede to Sayre-McCord that Smith's preoccupation with the narrow circumstances of behavior can diminish the ideality of the spectator. My present discussion will focus more on the power of consulting the impartial spectator for holding us to a high standard rather than an analysis of the standard itself.

> employed in making them. Every day some feature is improved; every day some blemish is corrected. He has studied this idea more than other people, he comprehends it more distinctly, he has formed a much more correct image of it, and is much more deeply enamoured of its exquisite and divine beauty.
>
> He endeavours as well as he can, to assimilate his own character to this archetype of perfection. But he imitates the work of a divine artist, which can never be equalled. He feels the imperfect success of all his best endeavours, and sees, with grief and affliction, in how many different features the mortal copy falls short of the immortal original. He remembers, with concern and humiliation, how often, from want of attention, from want of judgment, from want of temper, he has, both in words and actions, both in conduct and conversation, violated the exact rules of perfect propriety; and has so far departed from that model, according to which he wished to fashion his own character and conduct. (VI.iii.25)

Smith represents the wise and virtuous person as engaged in direct contemplation of the idea of perfect propriety. He mentions neither the judgment nor the exemplarity that are generated from imagining a fair and impartial spectator. Interestingly, the standard is—at least as the wise and virtuous man posits it through his "acute and delicate sensibility"—unattainable.[32] Smith walks back and forth a bit between reporting this judgment of unattainability as, on one hand, merely a perception of the virtuous person who is sensitive to his "imperfect success" and, on

[32] In this, Smith echoes the Stoic denial that anyone can actually achieve the moral status of the Sage. See Brennan (2015). Of course, he evidently disagrees with them in his choice to predicate wisdom and virtue of high achievers nonetheless.

the other, a fact derived from the inevitable gap between a "mortal copy" and "immortal original." But he suggests, in characterizing the virtuous person's daily work here as "improving" and forming "a much more correct image," that he considers the virtuous person to be truth-tracking in their ideation about propriety.

There is a solution to our puzzle in this depiction of the wise and virtuous person's work of drawing the outlines of propriety. The activity is reminiscent of Den Uyl and Griswold's model of the love of virtue for its own sake being generated from the exercise of imagining a wise and impartial judge. The virtuous person revises and improves his conception of perfect propriety in the same way: by consulting his own—more perfect—iteration of such a judge. Thus, the standard of perfect propriety and the judgment of the impartial spectator coincide completely through all the stages of drawing clearer and more accurate outlines of propriety. The more mature moral agent will imagine an impartial spectator who exercises greater scrutiny and discrimination in judging conduct and sentiments, with the result that their standard of perfect propriety will bear the marks of scrutiny and discrimination accordingly.

5. An Objection

An objection to this vision of complete coincidence of the standard of perfect propriety and the judgement of the impartial spectator might be raised in the following way: The impartial spectator is disinclined to hold us to the standard of perfect propriety because that standard leaves even the virtuous person disappointed and unhappy.[33] Speaking of even "the wisest and best of us all," Smith says that they "see nothing but weakness and imperfection" when they compare themselves with the standard of perfection (TMS III.iii.24).[34] Though superlatively

[33] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for directing my attention to Smith's characterization of the standard as particularly onerous.

[34] Note Smith's use of the superlative (wisest and best) rather than only the positive here. He means to emphasize that the achievement of the greatest moral progress is no release from the humiliation of self-evaluation.

good, this moral agent "can discover no ground for arrogance and presumption, but a great deal for humility, regret and repentance" (TMS VI.iii.24). The impartial spectator does not want us to be unhappy, though. Smith says, "That degree of self-estimation, therefore, which contributes most to the happiness and contentment of the person himself, seems likewise most agreeable to the impartial spectator" (VI.iii.50). The impartial spectator wants us to attain happiness and so approves the self-approbation that is productive of happiness and contentment. Insofar as clinging to a standard of perfect propriety generates feelings of regret and repentance inconsistent with happiness and contentment, the impartial spectator will disapprove, or perhaps only withhold approval, of such adherence to the standard.[35] It is as if Smith took to heart the lesson of Horace's *Epistles* 1.6: *insani sapiens nomen ferat, aequus iniqui/ultra quam satis est Virtutem si petat ipsam*.[36]

This worry is well-founded in so far as there is a *prima facie* tension between, on one side, the fact that our desire to attain perfect propriety generates disappointments and, on the other side, the impartial spectator's inclination to find agreeable what contributes to our flourishing. Indeed, if the desire to attain the standard is constitutive of aspiration, then we would see in this tension an ultimate disapproval of aspiration by the impartial spectator. The complete coincidence in the exemplarist account would be undone.

But the tension is superficial. The wise and virtuous person who principally attends to the standard of perfect propriety is not robbed of happiness by the regret and repentance that

[35] I will ultimately reject this counterargument, but it is worth noting that something like this might be at play in I.i.5.8. Smith says there that life sometimes serves up unbearably difficult situations, and though our conduct and sentiments in those situations may "fall short of the most perfect propriety, it may still deserve some applause, and even in a certain sense, may be denominated virtuous." However, he explicitly says in this same passage that these are situations in which we cannot moderate our sentiments to a level "in which the impartial spectator can enter into them," suggesting that the impartial spectator does hold the bar at the standard of perfect propriety.

[36] "Let the wise man bear the name of madman, the just of unjust, should he pursue Virtue herself beyond due bounds" (1.6.15-16).

he endures in reflecting on his moral shortcomings. For one thing, he is exceptionally aware and sensitive to the moral sensibilities of his fellows, and so has a gladdening (but not insolent) conception of his own moral achievement (VI.iii.25). And, secondly, precisely because of his understanding of the difficulty in achieving moral excellence, he is in a unique epistemic position to recognize and rejoice in the moral achievements of others. "He, who knows how difficult it is to excel, esteems and honours their excellence, and never fails to bestow upon it the full measure of applause which it deserves" (VI.iii.25). All the pleasures that attend sympathizing with our fellows are magnified for the virtuous man who sympathizes with the good, knowing it is good.[37]

The exemplarist interpretation of how the virtuous person engages the idea of an impartial spectator remains viable, then. And when the reading is applied to particular passages in TMS, a vision of aspiration readily emerges. Consider the application to Smith's account of the stages of natural development of self-command.[38] The young child reflects not at all upon the judgments of others and so has no reflective ability to equilibrate their emotions and conduct with the expectations of those upon whom they are making demands. As the child matures, a "natural wish" to win the approbation of his fellows drives the youth to act in ways that gain their favor (TMS III.3.22). Even in the "weakest man," brief and cursory

[37] Further, against the interpretation that the impartial spectator aims at happiness rather than a high standard, Smith says in VI.iii.53 that the degree of emotion and habit "that is most agreeable to the impartial spectator is likewise most agreeable to the person himself." This passage presents the same likeness that is articulated at VI.iii.50, but it reverses the items that are identified as alike. In presenting the self-estimation "which contributes most to the happiness and contentment of the person himself" as "seem[ing] likewise most agreeable to the impartial spectator," it seemed as though Smith meant that the fact of the contribution to the person's happiness is what grounds or causes the impartial spectator's approval. But in reversing the items at VI.iii.53, we can see that the causal claim was not intended. The impartial spectator and the wisest and best person himself most likely coincide in their judgments, I think, because they are both correct.

[38] Strictly, he says that these are "the different shades and gradations of weakness and self-command," but because he begins with the account of a young child and ends with a fully actualized wise person, it is difficult to read the passage as offering no developmental theory (III.3.21-25). Smith's fondness of the Stoic theory of *oikeiosis*, see n. 14, lends itself to this interpretation. See Forman-Barzilai (2010) for the most thorough examination of Smith's thought about *oikeiosis*.

consideration of how a fellow will observe his situation "calls off his attention from his own view; and his breast is, in some measure, becalmed the moment they come into his presence" (III.3.23). The pleasure of fellow-feeling can elevate the weak man to firmness since "the pleasure which he derives from this sentiment supports and enables him more easily to continue this generous effort" (III.3.24). Finally, "the man of real constancy and firmness, the wise and just man" will bear self-command as a habit. "He does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel" (III.3.25).

These passages describe the development of self-command, which is the virtue Smith considered to be foundational to all others.[39] What drives the development, I am contending, is an initial "natural wish" that gives way to virtue ethical aspiration. After firmness and constancy have become habits, individuals are released from "merely affect[ing] the sentiments of the impartial spectator." They are able to *adopt* them, *identify* with them, *almost become* the impartial spectator itself. These dimensions of post-habituation conceptualizing of the impartial spectator match the elements of the drive to aspire. The man of self-command (i) has the need to understand the impartial spectator's sentiments, not merely to imitate them; (ii) desires to be self-directing by identifying with the impartial spectator; and (iii) is eager to improve by (almost) becoming an impartial spectator—the "almost" emphasizes the perpetuity of the eagerness.

Not only do these attributes of the firm and constant man match the elements of the drive to aspire, but they also echo particularly the ancient models of virtue ethics that depict

[39] See TMS VI.3.11: "Self-command is not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principal lustre."

aspiration as a value-orientation that is available only to those who are already on the path to virtue. Recall that for Aristotle, ethical theorizing is reserved for those who have already been brought up well, and for the Stoics, virtue has the advent of reason as a prerequisite. Smith sets the habit of self-command as the disposition from which we can look upon the impartial spectator and, with firmness and constancy already established, desire to better ourselves all the more.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that a uniquely virtue ethical mode of aspiration can be located in Adam Smith's moral theory particularly in his description of the way in which wise and virtuous people are motivated to pursue perfect propriety. Locating aspiration in his theory is vital to understanding his theory as virtue ethical in its conception. Without virtue ethical aspiration, the theory departs from a central tenet of virtue ethical programs, both ancient and modern.

In uncovering this mode of aspiration, two aspects of Smith's work are brought to light. First, we can see that there is more involved in the motivation to virtue than only the inborn disposition to desire praiseworthiness. In addition, we may acquire a motivation that is informed, educated, and more purposely trained on the goal of being good. To aspire in the virtue ethical mode is not merely to desire generally "to be really fit," but to desire particularly to realize the exact and exacting details of perfect propriety and adopt, not merely imitate, all the sentiments of an ideal judge. That is, we can see that moral motivation is thought by Smith to have its untrained and innate iteration, but also its developed and mature iteration. The latter is the site of aspiration.

Second, by considering the shape of aspiration—its recruitment of desires for understanding and self-direction and improvement—we can more readily appreciate the

complexity of the virtuous person's motivation. He imitates the judgments of the impartial spectator, but not merely for the sake of imitation. His goal is to become self-determining and independent in his judgements, and so he wants to think as the impartial spectator thinks, act as the standard of perfect propriety demands. He consults external standards, but only in his effort to embody the standard. To understand the difference between adhering to a standard and becoming the standard is a mark of aspiration, and Adam Smith has equipped his wise and virtuous agent with exactly that.

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