

AMBITION

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To quote Rousseau in The Social Contract, "I start in without proving the importance of my subject."

The idea for this paper originated several years ago on the island of Tahati, as I observed people whose greatest concern in the world appeared to be when to wake up in the morning. Due to their climate and proximity to the sea, their basic needs for survival were easily satisfied. Unlike the people that I observed eight hours later in Los Angeles, time, job and government requirements did not appear to be an important concern in their life. Although not in a position to question which people were the happiest, whether the additional effort put forth by the people of Los Angeles over those in Tahati was deemed to be a legitimate question. If the additional effort could not be justified, why not move to Tahati, sit on the beach, and play in the sun? One must question the logic where one person works hard for 50 years to retire on the beach and another moves to the beach at an early age simply to live. Which one is better off?

Toward this end, this paper will examine whether ambition is a worthwhile characteristic for an individual as well as a characteristic which society should attempt to instill in its citizens. In reviewing ambition, three major questions are examined in order to determine whether ambition is worthwhile:

1. What is the overall nature of ambition?
2. How can society balance the competing interests between the ambitious and the unambitious?, and,
3. Is society better off with ambitious people?

Upon awakening each day, each person must decide how he will live that day, with the distinguishing factor being effort. He must decide:

--Will I get up?

--Will I get by?, or,

--Will I get ahead?

For purposes of this paper, those persons that want to "get

ahead", will be considered ambitious. Whatever man's general motivations, the bottom line is that a small percentage are willing to make the additional sacrifices which allow them to do more than to "get by". Although unaware of any exact figure, it would appear that for the majority of people, most are content to just get by. Perhaps the old business maxim of 80%/20% might have some relevance. That is, in any given situation, 80% of the work will be accomplished by 20% of the people and with the majority following the course pursued by the minority.

By definition, "ambition" is of Latin origin and initially meant "a going around", specifically for votes. Ambition now indicates a strong will to succeed and desire to achieve a particular end, without any limitation as to the activity pursued. However, in this sense ambition must be distinguished from pride. Although both motivations are internal, pride motivates an individual for his own satisfaction whereas ambition motivates an individual for his own self-advancement. As a result, ambitious activities usually involve some degree of public competition. Ambition usually describes pursuits in areas such as business or politics rather than academics or personal pastimes. Emphasis tends to be on activities which are active in nature rather than passive. Perhaps the best definition of ambition is one which emphasizes that trait in an individual where he wants more of something, and sooner, than the typical person. Unlike success, ambition is difficult to measure, and centers more on the motivation of an individual at a particular time than his life-style or net worth.

In return for the additional effort made by ambitious people, the typical returns are fame, money, prestige, responsibility, and power. All involve some attempt to control their environment in a very self-interested manner. Such elusive benefits vary at any given time from the number of asses owned in Biblical times to the more contemporary definition of whether one has been famous for fifteen minutes. It is interesting to note, however, that such returns do not appear to be the primary motivators of ambitious people. Regardless of the money earned, available power or fame achieved, such benefits never seem to be enough. Perhaps the one common factor among ambitious persons is that, whatever they are striving for, they can never seem to have "enough". For example, an ambitious farmer would be one that does not want to own all the land in the county, just the land next to his land.

In examining ambition, it is helpful to examine from a psychological and political perspective the basic motivations of man, whether ambitious or unambitious:

--Maslow's analysis of human behavior would indicate that a person should be content once he has satisfied his basic

needs for food, shelter, and sex. For the great majority of people, in whatever culture or period in history, this would appear to be the case. This would particularly seem to be the case in societies such as Tahiti. Note that one's level of effort is directly related to the degree of difficulty in satisfying his basic needs. Whether man can survive by sitting on the beach or accepting government hand-outs, most are content to do as little as they can to get by. Most people appear content to adopt the predominant values and habits that are practiced by the majority without any significant thought given to their merit. Historically, the status quo has remained virtually unchanged from one generation to the next. As defined by Maslow, getting ahead, i.e. self-realization, is important to all persons, but not to the extent that most are willing to make the time or monetary sacrifices to achieve that end. Yet, as evidenced by Maslow, there is always a minority in any society that wants more than just food, shelter and sex. For some reason, simply surviving and enjoying life at a relaxed pace is not enough for everyone.

--Freud tries to define man's primary motivation by asking the question:

"...what do men themselves show by their behavior to be the purpose and intention of their lives. What do they demand of life and wish to attain in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so."

Accordingly, Freud argues that man is oriented toward self-gratification, always motivated by the "pleasure principle".

--Hobbes would argue that man's basic attitude is "nasty, brutish and short". All persons have one basic goal, power.

--Ecclesiastes argues that:

"...whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them...then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sea"

--Rousseau would argue that man seeks personal security over his fear of death, and is willing to forego the laws of nature over moral laws if the trade-off is beneficial.

In a nutshell, a review of past and current Western thought fails to reveal any definitive motivation of man. Whatever external expectations that are placed on an individual, the level of effort put forth on a daily basis remains an individual decision.

Although the primary motivation of man cannot be specifically identified, the specific motivations of ambitious people can best be summarized as follows:

1. --A need to measure their self-esteem through social comparison, in which they judge their own identities against the rest of the world. As a result, each day provides an opportunity to test themselves against others in a competitive situation, with money, power or social status serving as the ultimate report card. The public nature of society provides an opportunity for ambitious people to try to win and gain acceptance, which if successful bolsters their self-esteem.

The fact that ambitious people need the public nature of society cannot be overemphasized. Although society does not necessarily need ambitious people, ambitious people need society if they are to be seen and to be heard. At any given time in history ambitious people seek out that part of society which provides the greatest visibility and opportunity for achieving "more". Such professions have traditionally included business, politics, the Church and the military. Moreover, the move in or out of such professions appears to be cyclical in nature. Similar to Adam Smith's "guiding hand" principle in economics, once the number of ambitious people become concentrated, the emphasis shifts to another profession. At present, business seems to be the profession chosen by many ambitious people.

2. --That ambitious people are motivated as a result of a "competitive code in their chromosomes" whose origin is genetic. The crux of this argument is that survival requires competition, and as such human nature must be competitive. This position has been articulated by Darwin and is best personified in his concept of "the survival of the fittest".

3. --That the expectations of ambitious people are much greater than the majority, so that such persons are driven to meet standards which are higher than those actually required. An example would be the ambitious person that believes his competition never stops working, so as a result, he must always work to not fall behind. Influences which increase a person's expectations include his education, culture, nationality, and perceived opportunities. For whatever reasons, such people view any given situation differently. Where one person perceives a situation as a problem, such an ambitious person perceives an opportunity. These are the type of people who thrive on sayings like "When life gives you a lemon, make lemonade."

4. --And finally, there is the position that ambitious behavior is learned, with ambitious behavior dependent on

external factors. These factors include, but would not be limited to, one's family, religion and education. A society's emphasis on values such as a high work ethic and the importance of materialistic possessions all help to influence whether an individual is willing to make the necessary sacrifices to get ahead.

After reviewing the different alternatives, this writer takes the position that ambitious behavior is learned and that the great majority of people prefer to cooperate rather than to compete. For whatever reasons, there will always be certain people who are willing to accept the stress, risk and additional responsibilities which accompany ambitious activities. Their ability to exercise their ambition will also always be relative, largely dependent on variables outside of their control. Such variables include access to major political and economic centers, time in history and applicable government structure.

Thus, it would appear that whatever the objective, ambitious people will engage in competitive behavior to see who can obtain the most. The difficulty in competitive situations, however, is that there must always be winners and losers. Human nature is such and history indicates that when the difference between the haves and the have nots becomes too extreme, the majority prevails. Thus, the real issue concerning ambition is not what motivates people, as the answer is elusive and always changing. Instead, the real issue concerning ambition is how society can balance the competing interests between the ambitious and the unambitious.

Historically, the individual needed society to protect himself and his family against nature. The predominant concern was political in nature and not economic. This "shared vision" as to the purpose of society remained virtually unchanged with each subsequent generation. With this understanding of the social contract, each individual was expected to work for the benefit of the whole and not for his own particular interests. For those individuals that disagreed with the concept, their ability to move elsewhere was limited by a lack of knowledge as to where to move and why one society would be preferred over another. Basically, ambitious people in the past had to immigrate to take advantage of a particularly advantageous situation. This was particularly true when one did not have the advantages of inherited or wedded wealth.

However, modern technology has changed the role of society from political to one which is predominantly economic in nature. This shift is the primary reason why in today's global economy, ambitious people are now in a position to place their self-interest over the public interest. With the aid of computers and global telecommunication, ambitious

people are able to make themselves much more powerful than at any other time in history. To an ambitious person that is economically motivated, the main difference between any modern society now lies in their tax rates. Quality of life becomes important in deciding where to live and to vacation, not in where to work. In today's global economy, ambitious people are in a position to view all societies strictly as a commodity, able to move to whichever society best furthers their economic interests. Unfortunately, there are few winners, certainly not society, when the only rationale for any decision is financial success.

If a governmental policy is deemed to be unfavorable, for whatever reason, assets can be instantly transferred. Economic climates have become more important than environmental climates. This new set of circumstances has created an entirely new relationship between an ambitious individual and society. Gone forever is the absolute ability of the majority to control those persons responsible for much of the economic livelihood of that society. More important, a situation is presented where the economic motivations of the ambitious are able to make life less secure for the majority. In the name of economic development, the majority's standard of living is able to be negotiated away in exchange for "more", more jobs and more people. The fact that the majority's quality of life is lessened is not an immediate concern, as the society also experiences more pollution, more traffic and more crime.

Recognizing such inherent problems, why should society protect ambitious persons if class distinctions are likely to develop and all of society might decline? It must be asked, does society need ambitious people? Perhaps it would be best for the majority if ambitious people could be identified and moved elsewhere. Or, does the majority have the right to require economically ambitious people to work for the benefit of the whole? After all, were it not for the political stability and absence of arbitrary social and economic barriers, ambitious people would not be able to fully apply their talents. Or, perhaps society should realize that ambitious people oftentimes represent their best and brightest and try to direct such people through its tax structure. Although external and artificial, the majority would be able to control the level of ambition in that society. Able to define the standard of living desired in that society, the ambition of the minority could be manipulated for the overall benefit of the majority. Some would argue that this is the current function of the Federal Reserve Board. How long the minority would consent to being overburdened remains an open question.

Nonetheless, this writer believes that society needs ambitious people if it is to maintain and improve its overall standard of living. Arguably elitist, society must

realize that some people are just smarter and willing to work harder than others in accomplishing a particular task. If not recognized, that society is likely to decline and is in danger of being dominated by other societies. What the standard of living shall be in that society shall remain within the control of the majority.

Unfortunately, this writer believes that once the world's different standards of living become widely known, an even greater emphasis on economic rather than non-economic interests will exist. Such emphasis will present an even greater challenge to future societies than the traditional balancing of competing interests between the ambitious and the unambitious. This new challenge will be to not always place economic over non-economic interests, so that society fails to appreciate its heritage and culture.

It is ironic that the very reasons why an ambitious person is able to prosper, i.e. through the culture and political stability of a society, might lead to the ultimate downfall of that society. It will be interesting to see whether the values and order which took many generations to establish will be taken for granted in the name of economic self-interest. However, even today this appears to be the case as universities such as Stanford de-emphasize their Western thought program and the real proof of a college education is an MBA. Perhaps even more interesting will be the willingness of future generations to automatically accept the prior political decisions which affect their economic interests. A good example is the current social security program.

In conclusion, this writer believes that ambition is a worthwhile trait for an individual and society to possess, so long as it is kept in balance. Insatiable ambition presents a very serious threat to an individual and to society. The consequence of obsessive ambition is perhaps best stated by John Dean in his book concerning his involvement with Watergate, Blind Ambition:

To make my way upward, into a position of confidence and influence, ... I had to travel downward through factional power plays, corruption and finally outright crimes. Slowly, steadily, I would climb toward the moral abyss of the President's inner circle until I finally fell into it, thinking I had made it to the top just as I began to realize I had actually touched bottom.

Unlike Macbeth, it is hoped that ambitious people will use their energies to further the public interest and not their own self-interest. When based totally on self-interest, ambition will destroy the individual as well as society. It is interesting to note that in Japan, perhaps the greatest



economic nation of the past 30 years, many of its top executives are now dying from stress related heart attacks. From the perspective of the ambitious individual, perhaps the conventions and cultures of society will not allow him to achieve his maximum efficiency were his efforts left unrestrained. But it is through those restrictions that society will remain secure for the majority and for those generations, ambitious or unambitious, which will follow in the years ahead.