Journal of Contextual Economics, 143 (2023): 11 – 24
https://doi.org/10.3790/schm.2024.382493

Vanity And Social Media: Adam Smith Reassures Us That We Are Not All Narcissists

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Abstract

Social media have made it possible for us to display our vanity and court the attention of others at an unprecedented scale. This article engages Adam Smith's account of vanity to offer a fresh perspective on the online attention economy, focusing primarily on users' desire for attention and social validation. Vanity, Smith writes in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is a "folly" of our character, a "foible" we rightly make fun of – in others and ourselves. I argue that Smith's account of vanity not only helps us in our efforts to understand trends in online behavior, but also offers us a modicum of hope in a debate that tends to focus on the proven deleterious effects of social media. Vanity derives from (and presupposes) the desire for sympathy and human connection, and recognizing this dynamic allows us to regard much of our online behavior as flowing from our universal desire to love and be loved.

JEL Codes: A12, A13, B12

Keywords: Vanity, Sympathy, Social Media, Narcissism, Adam Smith

1. Why We Need 18th Century Vanity To Talk About 21st Century Social Media

The X (formerly: Twitter) account Bookcase Credibility (2023) has as its tagline "What you say is not as important as the bookcase behind you" (@BCredibility). Soon after everybody was forced onto Zoom and other video calling platforms by the Covid pandemic, studies found that the best way to come across as knowledgeable and authoritative is to talk in front of books (Hess 2020). Bookcase Credibility launched mid-April 2020 and commented on the bookcases of celebrities, TV personalities, and politicians. Trying to bolster your Zoom image with a "curated" bookcase is a form of what the 18th century moral philosopher and economist Adam Smith would call vanity. Then again, taking a video call in front of an untidy laundry basket can be just as vain – if, that is, you do it purposefully to impress upon people that you do not need a bookcase to be credible.

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Vanity, Smith writes in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), is a "folly" of our character, a "foible" we rightly make fun of – in others and ourselves (TMS VI.iii.43, VI.iii.52). We betray our vanity when we invest just that little bit of extra effort in outward appearances that we hope will earn us a level of validation, acknowledgement, or praise that we fear we would not otherwise receive. @BCredibility owes its success to the fact that we all understand how vanity works, are (most of us) prone to it ourselves, and regard it as something that deserves (gentle) mockery. And though we perhaps would not have used Smith's old-fashioned term to describe the phenomenon, it is not a stretch to say that vanity drives much of our online behavior, especially on social media.

In this article, I propose that Smith's account of vanity can help us reframe certain online trends and behaviors in helpful ways. In particular, I suggest that "vanity" is a more useful concept in many contexts where we currently talk about "narcissism." Young Millennials and Gen Z-ers in particular are frequently labeled "narcissistic" in the popular press and some even speak of a "narcissism epidemic" (Twenge and Campbell 2010; Williams 2016). This "epidemic" is particularly visible online, in particular on social media. And since narcissism is not (on most accounts) something that can be harnessed as a force for good, this epidemic naturally is cause for concern.

I argue that "vanity" both is a better fit for much of the online behavior currently labeled narcissistic and provides a (slightly) more hopeful framework to help us think about the social media landscape. Because while a vain person and a narcissist may look a lot alike, there is a crucial difference between the two: vanity derives from (and presupposes) the desire for sympathy and human connection, while narcissism is marked by a lack of empathy (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – DSM 2013). To call online behaviors narcissistic is to hint that they stem from a personality disorder, whereas to call them vain is to connect them to our (on Smith's account) universal desire to love and be loved (TMS III.1.6).

Ovid's Narcissus, like today's clinical narcissist as described in DSM, is incapable of love or intimacy (Ovid 1976). The vain person, by contrast, merely goes (very far) astray in their efforts to win love. Introducing vanity into the debate about the so-called "narcissism epidemic" allows us to restrict the label "narcissistic" to the relatively small group of people who could properly be diagnosed as such based on the description set forth in the DSM and related medical literature (DSM 2013; Caligor, Levy, and Yeomans 2015). The rest of us should, I argue, be referred to as "merely" vain. And though we can of course be vain offline as well as online, social media have made it possible for us to display our vanity and court the attention of others at an unprecedented scale.

One advantage of using Smith's account of vanity to talk about social media, then, is that in most cases it provides a more precise label than narcissism. Furthermore, to call behaviors vain rather than narcissistic takes them out of the sphere of psychiatric disorders and encourages a more inclusive conversation: if we are all (a little bit) vain, then we are more likely to see ourselves on a spectrum instead of on the right side of the sharp dichotomy between narcissists and non-narcissists. But there is another advantage to Smith's account: according to Smith, vanity is part and parcel of commercial society. Our vain pursuits stimulate the economy, both because we buy all

kinds of goods and services that we feel will lend us a certain prestige, and because we know that having a well-paying job gives us status in and of itself.

The fundamental reason we want to "better our condition" is to gain "approbation" from others, argues Smith (WN II.iii.28). Today, we of course have the ability to broadcast our news purchases, financial successes, *etc.*, far more widely and easily than in Smith's day. But there is another, related, economy that is more interesting for my purposes: the accounting we keep of our popularity expressed by means of likes, retweets, number of followers, friends, right-swipes, *etc.* Social media platforms provide us with clear metrics of our online success and allow us to compare ourselves to others based on numbers. These numbers can translate to financial gains as they do for, *e. g.*, influencers, but for most of us they are primarily a measure of social validation. And social validation, as Smith already pointed out back in the 18th century, is extremely addictive because it feeds our vanity.

In what follows, I first distinguish vanity as Smith understands it from narcissism, explaining how vanity relates to the desire for sympathy and why it is (far) more prevalent than narcissism. Next, I explore the roles vanity and sympathy play in the economy at large and the online economy of social validation in particular. I draw on a few contemporary examples to consider both Smith's extremely pessimistic predictions about the future of commercial society and his more optimistic comments about the possibility to "direct vanity to proper objects" (TMS VI.iii.46).

2. Narcissus Does Not Need Your Love (And Is Not Vain)

In Ovid's Metamorphoses, Narcissus spurns the advances of all the young men and women who desire him. He is described as having an "intense pride" (*superbia*) that makes him impervious to the love others feel for him (Ovid 1976, Book III, 116). One of the scorned lovers prays to the goddess Nemesis who makes Narcissus fall in love with his own reflection in a pool. After a while, Narcissus realizes what is going on:

> "I am he. I sense it and I am not deceived by my own image. I am burning with love for myself." He wonders how to proceed – how can you court yourself? "What I want I have. My riches make me poor. O I wish I could leave my own body! Strange prayer for a lover, I desire what I love to be distant from me." As he wastes away by the side of the pool in which he sees himself reflected, he takes solace in the fact that he and his love "shall die united" (Ovid 1976, Book III, 120).

The original narcissist clearly embodies a few (though not all) of the items included on the list of criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder in the latest version of the DSM. A narcissist, on the official clinical account, is characterized by a "pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, entitlement, and lack of empathy" (DSM 2013). Other sources place the emphasis on the narcissist's low self-esteem: "They unconsciously deny an unstated and intolerably poor self-image through inflation. They turn themselves into glittering figures of immense grandeur surrounded by psychologically impenetrable walls. The goal of this self-decep-

tion is to be impervious to greatly feared external criticism and to their own rolling sea of doubts" (Golomb 2012).

One aspect the various descriptions of Narcissistic Personality Disorder agree on is the narcissist's inability to develop intimate relationships because of their lack of empathy: they are "unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others" (DSM 2013, 669). In part because full-blown Narcissistic Personality Disorder is difficult to diagnose and, on most accounts, relatively rare, scientists prefer to talk about narcissistic traits (MacDonald 2014; Caligor, Levy, and Yeomans 2015). Talking about narcissistic traits is helpful because it allows for more nuance than the strict division of the population into narcissists and non-narcissists. However, it also has the disadvantage of diluting the meaning and usefulness of narcissism as a diagnosis. I suggest that in many of the cases where we are talking about narcissistic traits, vanity (as Smith understands it) may be a more useful concept.

Ovid's Narcissus has a grandiose sense of self and also feels extremely entitled but – on all ancient accounts – he was quite right to be pleased with himself. Everyone loved him for his astonishing beauty. There is nothing to suggest he was insecure, deep down, or had any doubts about his superiority. This is affirmed by the use of the word *superbia*, pride, to describe his attitude. Notably, Ovid did not talk about Narcissus' vanity, *vanitas.* Adam Smith adopts the ancient distinction between *superbia* and *vanitas* and describes as proud those people who think very highly of themselves and expect you, as a matter of course, to think highly of them too (TMS VI.iii.41).

Unlike vain people, proud people do not "court your esteem" and are often unpleasant to be around. If you do not pay them the respect they sincerely believe they deserve, they will despise you for it. But even if you venerate them, they will merely receive your praise as their natural due. Their pride makes them haughty and severe. Narcissus, regarded from the perspective of Smith's TMS, is rightly called proud: he is "unaffected" by the love of others and is appalled when the nymph Echo tries to embrace him. "May I die before what's mine is yours," he cries, fleeing from her (Ovid 1976, 120). She is so far below him that he regards her affection as an insult. The criterion on the Narcissistic Personality Index most clearly embodied by Narcissus is lack of empathy (DSM 2013, 670). And obviously he is not capable of developing any intimate relationships with people other than himself either.

But are the other traits on the Narcissistic Personality Index still meaningfully narcissistic when they occur in somebody who does feel empathy and is able to form close personal relationships? This is a matter of debate among scientists (MacDonald 2014; Grubbs *et al.* 2019). My purpose here is to show that whatever the outcome of this debate may be, it is helpful to introduce Smith's concept of vanity because it takes matters out of the clinical/psychiatric sphere of psychiatric disorders altogether. Smith's vanity is, in many cases, a better fit for what we experience in ourselves and in others every day.

Smith states that "all the toil and bustle in this world" ultimately has just one purpose: "to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (TMS I.iii.2.1). It is because we want to be liked and loved that we sometimes give ourselves airs, are preoccupied with our appearance and purchase things we do not really need (or cannot really afford). Since we are inclined to

look at ourselves as we imagine others might see us, we base our self-estimation on what others might think of us. Our sense of self-worth therefore depends on the (apparent or imagined) opinion of others. Smith argues that we will go to great lengths to make others think well of us: "To deserve, acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind, are the great objects of ambition and emulation" (TMS I.iii.3.2).

But the praise we receive for the things we have and the way we look and act easily becomes a substitute for the kind of sympathy that can exist only between intimate friends. This deep, steady sympathy is what we all really want, according to Smith, but it is by its very nature limited to only a handful of people: those close to us who see us for who we are behind our vain facade. Our natural desire for sympathy deteriorates into vanity when we become more concerned with the superficial praise of the many than with the "true" praise only those familiar with our deepest motives and sentiments can give us. Vanity can easily become a very strong driving force: "To those who have been accustomed to the possession, or even to the hope of public admiration," Smith writes, "all other pleasures sicken and decay" (TMS I.iii.2.7). Our craving for validation will never be satisfied because deep down we know that people are praising merely the image we have crafted of ourselves. What, then, is this sympathy we so desperately crave?

3. Sympathy, TikTok Duets, And Vanity as a Mere "Foible"

Even "the greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society" sometimes derives "sorrow from the sorrow of others." Sympathy is not itself a virtue but rather a precondition for it: it is an "original passion of human nature," a sentiment which some of us feel more acutely than others but nobody is entirely without (TMS I.i.1.1). Smith gives us a few examples, carefully broadening the scope of sympathy beyond mere "sorrow" as he goes along. When we see a dancer on the slack rope we "twist and balance" our bodies as we imagine he must do to keep himself from falling. When we see the "sores and ulcers" which beggars expose to us on the street, we feel our arms itching as if we were similarly afflicted. We change "places in fancy with the sufferer," and "enter as it were into" the other person's body, imagining that we endure "the same torments." What we feel may be weaker in degree, but is not "altogether unlike" the original pain we are witnessing. Not only "persons of delicate fibres," but also "men of the most robust make" are subject to this kind of sympathy (TMS I.i.1.3).

Building on this first set of examples, Smith then shows that our "fellow-feeling" is called forth not just by sorrow, but by other passions as well. In fact, any passion a person experiences can cause "an analogous emotion […] in the breast of every attentive spectator" (TMS I.i.1.4). Though the word sympathy was perhaps originally used "to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others," it "may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (TMS I.i.1.5). Our sympathy with others can feel like an involuntary, bodily reaction (in the case of the slack rope dancer and the beggars) but can also be brought about in more complicated ways, as for example when we watch a play and rejoice in the success of the protagonist.

Sympathy, on Smith's account, therefore comprises a range of sentiments from the simple to the complex. The simpler, "bodily" forms of sympathy correspond to what today biologists and psychologists would call empathy while the more complex forms involve the imagination and are closer to "sympathy" as we commonly understand it today (De Waal 2010). After pointing out the central role of sympathy in our day-to-day existence, Smith reveals that it also is the source of our greatest happiness. There is nothing better than to be on the receiving end of sympathy: "whatever may be the cause of sympathy, or however it may be excited, nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary" (TMS I.i.2.1).

Sympathy is so important to us that to be denied it when we expect to receive it causes us pain. Anyone who ever shared something on social media without getting much of a response knows this feeling. And while it of course also is a very common experience in offline situations, it causes much of our online anxiety. Smith describes the particular sense of isolation we experience when we make a joke and nobody laughs. Conversely, there is no greater pleasure than to feel that what we say resonates with others, creating what Smith calls a "harmony of sentiments" (TMS I.iv.1). Smith often uses musical language to describe our (lack of) connection to others. We adjust our emotional "pitch" (TMS VII.iv.28) to make sure others can enter into our feelings and try to avoid striking a "jarring" note (TMS I.ii.3.7).

This desire to resonate with others, and for others to resonate with us, is at the heart of TikTok's Duet feature. The app allows you to respond to somebody else's video with your own, showing the original video and your response to it simultaneously to the viewers. A popular use of the feature is to sing and play songs with other users of the app: someone records a simple version of the song, a second user adds a baseline, a third a baritone, a fourth a violin accompaniment, and so on. Participants in these "duet-chains" have to literally adjust their pitch to sing in harmony with the people who came before them, but there is more to these videos than just their musicality. The best ones are engaging, even moving, because of the apparent sincerity and intensity of the creators.

Are the participants in these duets vain? Probably yes, at least to some degree – they did post their video to TikTok, after all. But there appears to be a good deal of sympathy mixed in with this vanity: the musical harmonies are accompanied by what comes across as genuine delight. This does not mean the duet participants are indifferent to the number of times their videos have been watched. On Smith's account, we can both be vain and sincerely enjoy harmonizing with others – musically and emotionally. This is why he often calls vanity a folly or foible: it is a trait that, under many circumstances, deserves nothing more serious than friendly mockery (TMS VI.iii.43). Our vanity may in fact make us more likeable because it makes us keen to figure out what other people want to see and hear – as opposed to the classical narcissist who cannot be bothered with other people's feelings and interests (DSM 2013). Vain people go out of their way to please, which is part of what makes them successful. It was as true in the 18th century as it is today on TikTok.

But TikTok duets and credibility bookcases are only part of the story. The trouble is that vanity admits of many shades and can turn into a serious vice when it is no longer

tethered to sympathy. When all our efforts are geared towards projecting a particular image of ourselves, and our self-esteem comes to rely entirely on the public recognition garnered by this image, vanity can become harmful – to ourselves and to society at large. Vanity is a thing of all ages, Smith explains, and that is a good thing for vanity can indeed inspire greatness. Caesar would not have crossed the Rubicon if he had not been vain. Of Caesar and Alexander the Great, Smith writes: it "was, perhaps, necessary, not only to prompt them to undertakings which a more sober mind would never have thought of, but to command the submission and obedience of their followers to support them in such undertakings." But eventually both Caesar and Alexander the Great allowed their presumptions to betray them "into a vanity that approached almost to insanity and folly" (TMS VI.iii.28).

A little vanity, it appears, can be a good thing because it may give you the little nudge you need to get things done. But if you take it too far (and, *e.g.*, claim you are a descendant from Venus) you may end up assassinated by your "friends." Furthermore, you can be vain about pleasant or even genuinely good causes. As the example above shows, vanity may lead us to give the world delightful duets but it can also prompt us to, say, become a figurehead in the fight against climate change. It is why there is hope for the vain person as well as for a society in which vanity is prevalent: vanity can be directed towards "proper objects" (TMS VI.iii.46). But what decides whether vanity functions as a stepping stone towards the good or deteriorates into "blackest vice"? Circumstances play a key role, according to Smith, and this is exactly why he was concerned about the future of commercial society.

4. Smith's Concerns about Commercial Society and The "Attention Economy"

The term "attention economy" is currently used primarily to talk about the (big) tech companies that gather our data to nudge/manipulate our behavior on and offline (Mintzer 2020). Attention is the scarce good these "attention merchants" compete over, because attention translates to revenues: the more time you spend on Facebook and Instagram, the more parent company Meta learns about you, and the better it becomes at placing advertisements in front of you that you are likely to click on (Wu 2017). Meta sells your attention to advertisers and the more of your attention Meta can get, the more it can sell. But while from the perspective of big tech we are all just replaceable buckets of data, from our own individual perspective we are each of us at the center of our own private attention economy.

For us, like for the big tech companies, it is all about the numbers: number of likes, retweets, followers, friends, right-swipes, *etc.* (Zuboff 2015, 2018). But the numbers from our perspective indicate social instead of financial capital: they are metrics of social validation (Morgans 2017). On Smith's account, this relationship between our fragile self-esteem and its related "foibles" on the one hand and industry on the other is far from accidental. Vanity is one of the main drivers of the economy, and one of his biggest concerns is that what is good for the economy is frequently not beneficial to the individual's wellbeing. Today's big tech companies simply go a step further along

the same path that Smith described in the 18th century and exploit our craving for sympathy in the interest of their own financial gain.

Before the emergence of social media, Juliet Schor used the term "aspirational gap" to point out a 20th century incarnation of the phenomenon Smith describes. Smith's "poor man's son" watches fashionable people drive by in fancy carriages and dreams about a life in which he has these "conveniences" to himself: "He is enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity. It appears in his fancy like the life of some superior rank of beings, and, in order to arrive at it, he devotes himself for ever to the pursuit of wealth and greatness" (TMS IV.1.8). Similarly, Schor's late 20th century consumer watches TV and desires the comforts of both the rich and famous and the idealized sitcom family. TV pervaded life with "conspicuous status goods" and has "upscaled lifestyle norms" (Schor 1999). There is a growing disconnect between consumer desires and incomes because we have more reason than before to want what we do not have. In trying to close the "aspirational gap" between us and the people on TV, we are likely to borrow more, work longer hours, and (like Smith's poor man's son) be unhappier. Influencer culture today has given a 21st century twist to this trend because the most successful among them convey the suggestion that you can, in fact, "close the gap" and achieve their level of happiness if you just adopt their lifestyle, buy certain products, *etc.*

This has of course been the essence of good marketing since time immemorial, but never before was good marketing so addictive. Today's "persuasive tech" has "powerful AI pointed at your brain" (Harris 2020). The more we are drawn to social media, the more we are exposed not just to explicit advertisements but to the (idealized) lives of others. Seeing these happy lives, we will engage in what Smith calls "toil and bustle" to reach the same level of happiness (TMS I.iii.2.1). "Happiness," in this context, should be in quotation marks, however. At the end of a life spent toiling, the poor man's son realizes that he has been chasing a product of his imagination. When he was young, he admired the rich, and he assumed that the recipients of this admiration must be very happy indeed. But it was only ever his own admiration that was real, not the happiness that he supposed was its object: "Through the whole of his life he pursues the idea of a certain artificial and elegant repose which he may never arrive at, for which he sacrifices a real tranquillity that is at all times in his power, and which, if in the extremity of old age he should at last attain to it, he will find to be in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment which he had abandoned for it" (TMS IV.1.8).

Like Smith's poor man's son and Schor's 20th century consumer, we see that "rank and fortune" are admired and esteemed and we wish "to usurp this respect." We become preoccupied with our "dress," our "way of living," because we want to signal to the world that we have a "higher rank" and "greater fortune" (in any sense of the word) than really belong to us. We are preoccupied with what today we would call positional goods not only because we notice the respect paid to displays of wealth, but also because we notice that poverty makes one invisible. According to Smith, the poor are not taken notice of and go "unheeded." This, more than anything, makes poverty "mortifying." Nobody notices the poor man who "in the midst of a crowd is in the same obscurity as if shut up in his own hovel" (TMS I.iii.2.1). Smith recognizes

that people wish not to be poor because with poverty commonly come hunger and hardship, but he also emphasizes the shamefulness of poverty and its propensity to make people invisible. The poor man knows himself to be unheeded and it mortifies him. The thought of having his poverty exposed to the world makes his position worse: he desires to be seen, but he knows that increased visibility will only expose him to more contempt. This supposition leads Smith to say the following about our desire to better our condition:

> From whence, then, arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it (TMS I.iii.2.1).

If the "great purpose of human life" is to better our condition, and we want to better our condition because it will cause us to be "taken notice of with sympathy," it follows that "bettering our condition" is not the end goal but a means to what we are really after: sympathy, recognition and respect from our fellow human beings. But this, as we already know, makes us susceptible to vanity: "It is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us. But vanity is always founded upon the belief of our being the object of attention and approbation. The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world, and that mankind are disposed to go along with him in all those agreeable emotions with which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire him" (TMS I.iii.2.1).

You can be as virtuous as you like, but if you are also poor this means that you will not be noticed, and so your virtue will be known only to those very close to you. Nobody else sees you or even cares that you exist. In principle, we can be vain about anything, even about virtue, e. g., when we exaggerate our courage in stories we tell others about ourselves. But to find an audience for our stories, we first need to be noticed. And the easiest and most obvious way to attract any attention at all within commercial society is to (appear to) have enough money to "count" or "be somebody." It is easy to see how this translates to today's attention economy where our value is measured not in terms of material wealth but in accordance with social media validation metrics.

Again, online popularity can translate to financial gain but I am interested here primarily in the connection between our social media rankings and our desire for sympathy. At first glance, social media may appear to liberate us from the preoccupation with wealth: poverty does not have to be an obstacle to going viral. But of course posts can only go viral because they exist in the context of an economy dominated by billion dollar tech companies that make these posts possible in the first place. Equipped with the results of extensive psychological studies, these companies build "persuasive technologies" to target the people most desperate to be esteemed (*i. e.*, most of us) to take advantage of their "folly" for (financial) gain (Harris 2020; TMS VI.iii.43).

Following Smith, we can detect yet another and perhaps more surprising force that keeps the attention economy going. It is not merely – or in some cases not even primarily – the attention we crave for ourselves that drives our online behavior. Many of us are very much invested in contributing to the attention others receive. In these cases, we do not want to emulate the success of others but add to it. Our sympathy

for them is such that we want them to maintain or even grow their superior status. In the next section I will use the BTS fandom as an illustration of Smith's account.

5. Contributing to a Hierarchical "System of Happiness": The BTS Army

According to Smith, exposure to the rich, powerful, and famous not only makes us strive for what (given the price we pay for it) may not be "worth the having." It also makes us want to contribute to the near-perfect happiness of these superior individuals. Smith holds that "nature would teach us to submit to [the rich] for their own sake, to tremble and bow down before their exalted station." Coming from them, we regard "a smile as a reward sufficient to compensate any services" (TMS I.iii.2.3). We "dread their displeasure," which would be "the severest of all mortifications." Smith explains that we tend to sympathize with people of "exalted station" for two reasons. First, in admiring these people we like to picture ourselves in their shoes and imagine how much we would enjoy the acclaim and admiration from the masses. Our power to "change places in fancy" with those of high rank makes us more kindly disposed towards them.

This may seem odd if we think of the resentment we ourselves may feel towards the wealthy. For example, if one of our high school classmates achieves great financial success later on in life, we are apt to envy them. We feel like this could have been us – should have been us, perhaps, because we consider ourselves more deserving – and become resentful and envious.[1] Envy can get in the way of sympathy, especially where it concerns our (perceived) peers: "It is agreeable to sympathize with joy," Smith writes, "and wherever envy does not oppose it, our heart abandons itself with satisfaction to the highest transports of that delightful sentiment" (TMS I.iii.1.9). Smith's examples involving those of "exalted station" show that we are more likely to feel this unencumbered sympathy with the ones elevated far above us, like royalty (TMS I.iii.2.3). If we look at today's substitutes for "royalty," his point is clearly borne out: Beyoncé, to take an obvious example, is a multi-millionaire, yet her followers do not begrudge her wealth. On the contrary, they want to contribute to what Smith calls her "system of happiness" in all the ways made possible by social media. To be followed by Beyoncé on Instagram would, for many, literally be quite priceless. To provoke her displeasure "the severest of all mortifications" (TMS I.iii.2.3).

A recent example of the kind of asymmetric, one-way sympathy Smith has in mind here is the BTS Army. It is what the approximately 40 million fans of the South Korean boyband BTS call themselves. The parent company of BTS, Big Hit Entertainment, was valued at over 4 billion US dollars in 2018. BTS is estimated to add 3.5 billion USD to South Korea's economy each year (Moon-hee 2018). The success of the boyband is due in large part to its extremely organized and active fan base which not

[1] For an insightful comparative discussion of Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the role of envy in commercial society, see Pignol and Walraevens 2017. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this source.

only buys lots of merchandise but also promotes the band abroad, earning BTS the number one spot on the US Billboard's Hot 100 in early September 2020 (the first time ever for a Korean group). Part of the BTS brand is a particular kind of openness and vulnerability around issues of diversity, inclusion and mental health and the Army (short for Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth) engages in social media activism around these themes. But most of all, the BTS fanbase rewards any positive mention of the group in all corners of the internet. A relative nobody (in social media terms) may mention BTS and suddenly receive a tremendous boost of internet love from Army strangers retweeting, liking and following the post (Garcia-Navarro 2021).

It is easy to scoff at this fandom and dismiss it as merely the latest incarnation of the Beatles mania from the sixties. The BTS Army may include its share of hysterical fans, but they also keep a close eye on Big Hit's business model and annual meetings and offer economic and legal insights to each other regarding the recent IPO and health of the company stock. They helped promote Korean language courses and textbooks now used in France and the US (Dooley 2020). At the heart of it all is a love for BTS – a love which according to Smith is geared at the preservation of the "system of happiness" in which we below admire the great at the top. The rich and famous therefore rightly believe that they are the object of "attention and approbation" (TMS I.iii.2.1). Aided by our imagination, we see "the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state" in the "condition of the great" (TMS I.iii.2.2). We want the rich and powerful to be immortal, and we are indignant when someone slights them or something bad happens to them.

Our sympathy for the rich and famous is aided by our imagination (allowing us to trade places "in fancy" with others, TMS III.3.2). But as the BTS Army example demonstrates, there is another force at work in this dynamic: we appear to take an almost aesthetic delight in contributing to the "order of society," founded on the "distinction of ranks" (TMS I.iii.2). "We are eager to […] assist them in completing a system of happiness that approaches so near to perfection; and we desire to serve them for their own sake, without any other recompense but the vanity or the honour of obliging them" (I.iii.2.3). We not only want status for ourselves; we also want certain others to rank above us so we may admire them. And in showing respect for those elevated above us we of course help build and maintain a status-based society.

Our personal vanity drives us to accumulate consumer goods and wealth (and with it, status and visibility); our admiration for and sympathy with certain elevated (groups of) individuals help maintain hierarchy. Inequality spurs vanity but also a particular kind of sympathy with certain people far above us. These phenomena are not necessarily beneficial or harmful in and of themselves, according to Smith. They do, however, make the machinery of commercial society practically unstoppable.

6. Directing Vanity at Proper Objects

"Vanity is very frequently no more than an attempt prematurely to usurp glory before it is due," observes Smith. Your twenty-five year old son may be a "coxcomb," he writes, but it is not uncommon for young coxcombs to turn into "wise and worthy"

forty year olds (TMS VI.iii.46). The trouble is that commercial society may well get in the way of that wisdom and worth. At the very worst, our vanity makes us delight in our status to such an extent that we feel the need to dominate others completely. "Slavery therefore has been universall in the beginnings of society, and the love of dominion and authority over others will probably make it perpetuall" (LJ(A) iii.117). Combined with our natural "love of domination and authority," our vanity can become very vicious indeed. So where does this leave us?

With his multifaceted account of vanity, Smith offers us a variety of instruments to analyze some of today's concerns and discomfort around what we now no longer have to call narcissism. Smith's own unease about the role of vanity in commercial society is also instructive as it points to an ambiguity inherent to our social media experience: vanity is clearly not all bad, perhaps even sometimes good, and yet it can also cause great harm. In this article I have argued that Adam Smith's theory of vanity can help us more clearly define two phenomena: the "narcissism" commonly ascribed to social media users and the so-called attention economy. I suggest that Smith's account enables us to expand the scope of the term "attention economy" to include the personal desire for attention that can make us vain. The scope of the term "narcissism," on the other hand, can be reduced once we see that many of the people we currently call narcissistic are really "merely" vain.

Smith believes vanity can (sometimes, and with great effort) be (re-)directed towards the good. Not the "greater good" as dictated by a purely economic growth-mindset but the moral good as Smith understands it, which for him always involves the cultivation of virtues closely related to sympathy (like humanity and generosity). Because sympathy is the root of vanity, the vain person is not impervious to moral improvement – especially at a young age when our moral character is more malleable than later in life. Smith is by no means optimistic about his society becoming any less vain; he regards vanity and commerce as too closely intertwined. He suggests, however, that vanity can under certain circumstances be a stepping stone to virtue. A person seeking attention and validation may, after all, do real good in the world in the process. They may even come to genuinely care about this good – even while they remain vain to some (great) extent. Vanity on this account is far from an unmitigated vice but instead a complex trait that can – but does not have to – dominate one's moral character. A little vanity may cause us to put in the bit of extra effort that helps open up new possibilities in our own lives and those of others. It is a matter of balance.

We can of course also talk about narcissism in this way, and argue that a touch of it makes you, say, more likely to be a successful CEO. But vanity lends itself much better to nuance because it is not a personality disorder in the sense set forth in the DSM. And more importantly for my purposes, vanity presupposed the capacity to empathize and sympathize while one of the key aspects of narcissism is a lack of just that capacity. Vanity is therefore a less condemning label than narcissism and in many situations more suited to describe behaviors on social media.

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