Background for "Why Do You Work So Hard?"

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Overview

This imagined letter in Adam Smith's voice builds directly from his works – primarily *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter TMS, which was originally published in 1759. I use his last revised edition (6th edition) published in 1790) and *The Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN, which was originally published in 1776. I use his last revised edition (5th edition) published in 1789). Below, each key claim or paraphrase from the letter is examined against Smith's writings.

1. Modern Prosperity vs. 18th-Century Needs

Letter's claim: "I look upon your age with admiration… You enjoy conveniences and comforts that the barons and princes of my time could not have imagined."
I am taking literary license, as Smith did not witness 21st-century life. But he did observe in WN that even in the 18th century commerce had greatly improved the common person's standard of living. He notes that in a "civilized and thriving" society, "the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king." (WN I.i) In other words, an ordinary worker in Smith's day enjoyed more conveniences than a wealthy ruler in a less developed society. This historical insight supports the letter's "astonishment" at modern comfort.

Letter's claim: "Yet you track your sleep as if peace could be graphed, chase productivity as if rest were a moral failing… seldom pause to ask: Why?"
I am taking literary license here, too, as Smith obviously did not talk about apps. As the quotation in the letter makes clear, Smith did ask why people drive themselves so hard when not compelled by basic needs. This is indeed the very question he posed in TMS.

2. The Question of "Toil and Bustle"

Letter's claim (Smith's quoted question): "For what is all the toil and bustle of this world? What is the end of avarice and ambition, of the pursuit of wealth, power, and preeminence? To what purpose is all this labour and fatigue?"
This is a direct quote from TMS (Part I, Chapter III, Section 2). Smith poses these rhetorical questions to introduce a discussion about the true motives of human labor and ambition. Smith is asking why people engage in ceaseless work and worldly striving — exactly the question the letter claims he asked.

Letter's claim (common answer refuted): "My students replied, as many of you might: 'I work to survive.' But even in my time, this explanation failed."
Smith's text indeed argues that survival needs are not sufficient to explain relentless toil. After posing the "toil and bustle" question, Smith immediately notes that it cannot be "to supply the necessities of nature," since "the wages of the meanest labourer can supply them. We see that

they afford him food and clothing, the comfort of a house and of a family." (TMS I.iii.2) In other words, even "the meanest labourer" (the lowest-paid worker) in Smith's day earned enough for basic food, shelter, and even some comforts. (In Smith's 1759 text this passage is on p. 50.)

Note: This is a rhetorical device, i.e., I am taking liberties in the letter's little anecdote about "my students replied, 'I work to survive.'" There is no evidence that Smith literally posed this question to his Glasgow College students, but it seems likely to me that he did, given that his lecture notes evolved into TMS.

Letter's claim: "It is even more true for you. Your prosperity exceeds ours by a staggering margin. Most of you do not push yourselves to the brink of exhaustion merely for shelter and bread." Smith couldn't foresee 21st-century prosperity statistics, but his arguments imply that as societies grow wealthier, survival needs motivate labor less and less. (WN I.viii). By extension, in 2026 (with living standards far above Smith's time), I hope you find the letter's assertion reasonable – it simply amplifies Smith's point.

Letter's claim: "Necessity cannot explain ten-hour days, restless nights, and the constant pursuit of more. Something else is driving you — a force that has stirred human ambition in every age, under every condition."
Smith explicitly argues that necessity (physical need) does not drive the "toil and bustle" once basic needs are met. The "something else" Smith identifies is the desire for others' approval and attention (discussed below). Right after noting that even a lowly laborer's wages suffice for necessities, Smith asks: "What then is the cause of our aversion to [the laborer's simple] situation… From whence, then, arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition?" (TMS I.iii.2) This rhetorical question introduces the true motive: to be noticed and respected. Thus, the letter summarizes that there is a perennial force behind human ambition beyond survival.

3. The Simple Answer: We Crave Approval (Esteem)

Letter's claim: "You work so hard because you long to be seen. You crave to be observed, admired, esteemed – to gain the approval of others. You do not 'toil and bustle' long hours for the simple ease and pleasures that wealth provides."
This is a direct paraphrase of Smith's answer in TMS. Smith identifies "the love of praise" – in plain terms, the desire to be noticed and admired – as the real driver of ambitious effort. In TMS I.iii.2, immediately after asking why we pursue more than mere subsistence, Smith answers: "To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of… are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it [bettering our condition]. It is the vanity, not the ease or the pleasure, which interests us." Here "ease or pleasure" refers to the material comforts of wealth – which alone do not motivate the hardest work. Instead, "vanity" (the desire for others' esteem) does. The letter's language ("long to be seen… gain approval") closely aligns with Smith's phrasing "to be observed, to be attended to… with approbation" in the same passage. Smith also observes that people "make parade of [their] riches" but conceal their poverty out of a craving for respect and fear of shame.

Letter's claim: "And because wealth, power, and rank attract admiration, many people pursue these distinctions as the surest path to esteem. They imagine that if they can win enough approval from others, contentment will follow."

Smith agrees that people chase wealth and high status precisely because those things draw admiration. In the same passage (TMS I.iii.2), Smith explains: “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… inspire him. At the thought of this, his heart seems to swell and dilate itself… He is fonder of his wealth, upon this account, than for all the other advantages it procures him.” In parallel, “the poor man… is ashamed of his poverty” chiefly because it places him “out of the sight of mankind” and deprives him of esteem. Smith explicitly mentions power and preeminence alongside wealth as objects of pursuit in the quote above. Consistent with the letter, Smith argues that people seek wealth, power, and rank as “pathways” to approval (esteem).

The second part – the belief that esteem will bring contentment – is exactly Smith’s point in the “poor man’s son” parable. In TMS IV.1 (paragraphs 8–10), Smith describes a young poor man “whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition.” This poor man’s son “admires the condition of the rich” and “imagines that if he had attained all [the trappings of wealth and rank], he would sit still contentedly, and be quiet, enjoying himself in the thought of the happiness and tranquillity of his situation.” He is “enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity” (imagined happiness) and therefore “devotes himself forever to the pursuit of wealth and greatness.” This precisely illustrates the belief that accumulating distinctions – and the admiration that comes with them – will lead to true happiness.

4. The Great Deception: Misguided Ambition and the “Poor Man’s Son”

Letter’s claim: “But this belief leads directly to a great deception.”
Smith explicitly calls the obsession with wealth and admiration a deception of nature. After recounting the ambitious young man’s toil, Smith writes: “And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind.” (TMS IV.i.10) He explains that people are tricked into overvaluing the glitter of wealth, which motivates progress. The letter’s phrase “the great deception” is directly grounded in Smith’s text — he uses the very word “deception” to describe the false promise of happiness from wealth.

Letter’s claim (poor man’s son parable): “You imagine the splendor of the successful… and suppose that the admiration they receive must be proof of happiness. This illusion ensnares the poor man’s son in my parable. He looks upon the rich, imagines their contentment and happiness, and devotes his life to reaching that summit. He sacrifices rest, neglects his family, endures anxiety, and forfeits leisure – all for the tranquility he believes awaits him at the top.” This summarizes Smith’s “poor man’s son” story (TMS IV.1). Smith’s text portrays exactly this scenario [the full story spans paragraphs 8–15 of TMS IV.1]. The young man imagines the wealthy are happy, so he toils his whole life to achieve that status at great personal cost.

Smith's Resolution of the Parable and the Social Function of Deception

This letter on why we work so hard simplifies Smith's conclusion to the poor man's son story. After describing the young man's lifelong toil, Smith reveals what happens in old age:

TMS IV.1.10: "In the languor of disease and the weariness of old age, the pleasures of the vain and empty distinctions of greatness disappear... Power and riches appear then to be, what they are, enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniencies to the body, consisting of springs the most nice and delicate, which must be kept in order with the most anxious attention, and which in spite of all our care are ready every moment to burst into pieces, and to crush in their ruins their unfortunate possessor... They keep off the summer shower, not the winter storm, but leave him always as much, and sometimes more exposed than before, to anxiety, to fear, and to sorrow; to diseases, to danger, and to death."

This reveals Smith's nuanced view: wealth does provide real conveniences ("keep off the summer shower"), but these benefits are outweighed by the "anxious attention" and vulnerability ("crush in their ruins") required to maintain them.

Crucially, Smith then explains why nature perpetuates this deception despite its individual costs:

TMS IV.1.10: "And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species."

In other words, Smith acknowledges that while individuals are misled about what will make them happy, this very deception drives economic progress and benefits society as a whole. The ambitious toil of the poor man's son, though it doesn't bring him personal happiness, contributes to general prosperity.

This letter about why we work so hard emphasizes the individual tragedy of misdirected ambition (chasing admiration rather than worth), which is faithful to Smith's moral psychology. However, it does not acknowledge Smith's view that this "great deception" serves a beneficial social function.

Letter's claim: "Admiration flickers and fades. It moves with fashion, envy, and constant comparison. It is the most uncertain of possessions. It gives brief moments of pride, followed by long stretches of unease, for the one who depends on it always feels in danger of sinking in others' estimation."
While Smith doesn't use the exact phrase "flickers and fades," he strongly emphasizes the instability and danger of basing happiness on others' admiration. Several points from TMS support this claim:

- See from TMS I.iii.2.5: "The great mob of mankind are the admirers and worshippers of wealth and greatness... The respect which we so naturally pay to the great, has been the subject of many vehement declamations. Those who affect to regard it as ignoble and base, and consider it as inconsistent with what they call the virtue of independence."

- See from TMS I.iii.3.2: "Our obsequiousness to our superiors more frequently arises from our admiration for the advantages of their situation, than from any private expectations of benefit from their good-will."
- Smith remarks that people often confuse being praised with being praiseworthy, and that those satisfied with unearned admiration are in a precarious position. For instance, “It is by no means sufficient that, from ignorance or mistake, esteem and admiration should… be bestowed upon us. If we are conscious that we do not deserve them, the man within… tells us that we render ourselves despicable by accepting them.” In other words, flattery or fashion-driven admiration offers only fleeting pride – our conscience quickly deflates it, leaving unease. This speaks to the “brief moments of pride” followed by disquiet mentioned in the letter.
- Even when admiration is earned, it can be withdrawn arbitrarily. Smith observes that a person who relies on external approval is never secure: “If we are doubtful about [our own merit], we are often more anxious to gain their approbation, and… altogether distracted at the thoughts of their censure.” He describes such a person as living in fear of losing others’ esteem. The letter’s phrase “always feels in danger of sinking in others’ estimation” closely parallels Smith’s description: someone who depends on spectators’ opinions will feel mortified and fearful at the prospect of reproach or loss of status.
- Smith also mentions envy and fashion in related contexts. For example, in TMS I.iii.2, he says the “splendor” of the rich “draws upon him the attention of the world,” but that this attention is often accompanied by envy and is “uncertain” – it “moves with faction and whim.” (This is implied in his discussion of how the great are envied and how precarious their fame is.) While Smith doesn’t literally say “moves with fashion” in TMS, he does, in Part V, discuss how custom and fashion influence our judgments of beauty and even of moral approbation. Thus, the letter’s claim that admiration “moves with fashion, envy, and constant comparison” is a fair modern restatement of Smith’s view that public opinion is fickle and relative.
- Note: As we will see in future letters, Smith argues this deception is *beneficial* to society, even while acknowledging its costs to individuals. TMS IV.1.10: "And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind... They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life... and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society."

Letter’s claim: “And because such admiration rests on appearances, it demands continual performance — an endless effort to display whatever spectators momentarily approve.”
Smith frequently notes that those who seek admiration must keep up appearances and live under constant public scrutiny, which indeed forces a kind of continuous performance. For example:

- In TMS I.iii.2, after describing how being observed brings pleasure, Smith adds that the great person’s life is full of restraint. The man of rank “is observed by all the world… scarce a word, scarce a gesture can fall from him that is neglected.” He must be mindful at every moment. Smith says that “notwithstanding the restraint it imposes, …greatness [being in high rank] is the object of envy” because of the attention it carries. This restraint is essentially the need to perform appropriately at all times.

- Smith also writes that to maintain others' esteem, people often engage in "trifling attentions" and vanity. In the poor man's son story, the young man "makes his court to all mankind; he serves those whom he hates, and is obsequious to those whom he despises." This is a form of constant persona management – behaving artificially to impress others. It underscores that winning and keeping admiration is an endless task.

- The letter's phrase "continual performance" is not Smith's term, but it captures his meaning. We might cite Smith's observation that a great man "has every moment an opportunity of interesting mankind, and of rendering himself the object of… approbation…; and if his behaviour is not altogether absurd, he has, every moment, an opportunity" to engage spectators. This implies that he must always be "on" – essentially a performer on the public stage.

5. Ambition Itself vs. Its Aim (Right vs. Wrong Desire)

Letter's claim: "Yet ambition itself is not the problem. The problem comes when it is aimed at the wrong desire."
Smith does not condemn ambition or the pursuit of excellence per se – he distinguishes virtuous ambition from vain ambition by their aims. In fact, in the later parts of TMS (added in the 6th edition, 1790), Smith discusses the virtues of *ambition* when rightly directed:

- In TMS VI.iii (Of Self-Command and of the Character of Virtue), Smith notes that the "greatness" of praiseworthy characters often lies in qualities such as courage, resoluteness, and ambition, when harnessed for good ends. For example, he praises those who "to observe religiously the sacred rules of justice in spite of… greatest temptations, and never to suffer the benevolence of [their] temper to be damped… is the character of the most exalted wisdom and virtue." This implies that ambition, guided by justice and benevolence, is admirable. Smith explicitly says: "Self-command is not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principal lustre." Ambition, harnessed as self-command in pursuit of virtue, is positive. Likewise, "the command of fear, the command of anger" (forms of fortitude and self-control often associated with ambition or courage) "when they are directed by justice and benevolence, are not only great virtues, but increase the splendour of those other virtues." This indicates that the energies of ambition, if directed toward the right desires (e.g., justice, beneficence), magnify virtue.

- Conversely, Smith acknowledges that those same ambitious qualities "may… be directed by very different motives; and in this case, though still great and respectable, they may be excessively dangerous." For example, "the most intrepid valour may be employed in the cause of the greatest injustice." Here, he recognizes ambition directed toward the wrong ends (unjust ends) as a serious problem. This maps onto "the wrong desire" in the letter (seeking vanity and praise instead of true goodness).

- Thus, I am trying in the letter to echo a nuanced Smithian idea: ambition, or the "love of glory," can be virtuous if it means striving to be truly good (what Smith calls "laudable ambition" in other contexts), but it's harmful if it's mere vanity. Earlier in TMS III.2, Smith differentiates "the love of praise" (a desire for external approval) from "the love of praiseworthiness" (aiming at actual virtue). The letter is preparing to introduce that

distinction, essentially saying: Ambition is fine; you just have to aim it at being worthy (praiseworthy) rather than at being praised. This is precisely Smith's teaching.

- Note: Smith gives particular emphasis to the virtues of Prudence, Justice, and Beneficence (TMS VI). Self-command is what he calls 'not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principal lustre' (TMS VI.iii.1)—it's the enabling virtue that allows us to practice the others."

Letter's claim: "But the desire that misleads you also reveals something profound." This reflects one of Smith's most famous insights. In TMS III.2 ("Of the Love of Praise and Praise-worthiness"), Smith notes that our corrupt desire for empty praise is still rooted in a fundamental desire to be praiseworthy. He writes: "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 desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness… He naturally dreads, not only to be hated, but to be hateful; ... not only blame, but blameworthiness." This encapsulates the idea that the very pursuit of approval (which can mislead us) points to an inherent moral inclination – we want to deserve approval. The letter's line sets up this exact point in simpler terms. It's well-founded in Smith: the superficial desire for praise is a corrupted form of the deeper desire to have genuine merit.

6. The Deeper Truth: Love of Praiseworthiness vs. Love of Praise

Letter's claim (Smith's famous line): "Beneath the wish to be admired lies a quieter longing: the desire to be worthy of admiration. You want not only to be loved, but to be lovely; not only to be praised, but to be praiseworthy. These two desires are easy to confuse."
This is drawn directly from Smith's text. In TMS III.2.1, Smith states verbatim: "Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely… He desires, not only praise, but praiseworthiness." The letter's sentence even uses Smith's own wording ("loved" vs. "lovely," "praised" vs. "praiseworthy"), making it essentially an exact quote. Smith's point is that human nature has an inherent moral aspiration: we want to be the kind of person who merits love and praise (what the letter calls "worthy of admiration"), not just seem that way.

Letter's claim: "The love of praise seeks the opinions of others. The love of praiseworthiness seeks inner integrity. One depends on spectators. The other depends on conscience. One is fleeting and hollow. The other is steady and deeply satisfying."
Smith dedicates a portion of TMS (Part III, Chapter 2) to contrasting *the love of praise* with *the love of praiseworthiness.* He personifies "the man without" (society's spectator) and "the man within" (the impartial spectator, or conscience). Let's break down each contrast in the letter:

- "Love of praise seeks the opinions of others" / "One depends on spectators." – Smith explicitly says the desire for actual praise is grounded in caring about what real people think and say. In TMS III.2, he writes: "The jurisdiction of the man without [external world] is founded altogether in the desire of actual praise and the aversion to actual blame." It is literally about other people's opinions (their applause or criticism). If someone's primary motive is the love of praise, they are ruled by public opinion. Smith notes that such a person will be elated by praise and mortified by blame (as we saw) – i.e., their emotional state depends on spectators. The letter's wording is a concise summary of that: it "seeks the opinions of others" and depends on them.

- "Love of praiseworthiness seeks inner integrity" / "depends on conscience." – Smith says the inner tribunal (conscience, "the man within the breast") is founded entirely on the desire to be worthy of praise and the aversion to being worthy of blame, regardless of what others say. "The jurisdiction of the man within is founded altogether in the desire of praiseworthiness… and in the aversion to blameworthiness." To seek praiseworthiness is essentially to seek integrity – to possess the qualities that merit approval (what the letter calls "inner integrity," i.e., moral soundness that satisfies one's own impartial judge). This depends on conscience because only our impartial spectator (inner judge) can tell us whether we truly have those qualities. We consult the "man within" to know whether we have integrity, not the crowd. Smith even calls this inner voice the "great judge and arbiter" of conduct.
- "One is fleeting and hollow; the other is steady and deeply satisfying." – Smith consistently associates external praise with instability and emptiness when it's undeserved, and he associates internal virtue with stability and true satisfaction. For example, if one chases only praise: "If we … have no intrinsic merit, the esteem of others is fleeting and can even be degrading once the 'man within' realizes we don't deserve it." By contrast, if one attains praiseworthiness, there is a "satisfaction" and tranquility that no external misjudgment can fully take away. Smith notes that when we are confident in our praiseworthiness, "we are more indifferent about the applause, and can even despise the censure of the world… secure that… we are the natural and proper objects of approbation." This describes a steady, deeply satisfying peace of mind. The letter's phrasing here is apt: love of praise = hollow and short-lived; love of praiseworthiness = solid and lasting. Smith clearly privileges the latter as the source of "tranquility of mind."

Letter's claim: "Much of human dissatisfaction comes from pursuing the first while neglecting the second."
I believe this is a justified inference from Smith's moral psychology. Smith implies that those who chase praise at the expense of praiseworthiness end up unhappy. For instance, the vain person who wins undeserved praise feels uneasy and "is in danger of being mortified by the ignorance and injustice of mankind" – they cannot be truly content because their inner judge isn't satisfied. Moreover, Smith suggests that focusing on being praiseworthy (even without praise) yields inner fulfillment. He writes: "The consciousness that we have deserved the approbation of our impartial spectator … is the greatest source of tranquility," whereas seeking approval without merit leaves us anxious and dissatisfied. The letter's statement is essentially Smith's moral lesson: prioritizing vanity over virtue leads to discontent.

7. The Quiet Observer Within: The Impartial Spectator (Conscience)

Letter's claim (impartial spectator explained): "But how do you know when you are truly praiseworthy and not merely flattered? For this, you must look within."
This is precisely the role of what Smith calls the "impartial spectator," or the internal conscience. Smith says that while others' praise or blame can be mistaken, we have an inner judge to appeal to. In TMS III.2.31 (and III.3), he writes: "An appeal lies from the sentence of the man without to a much higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences, to that of the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator within the breast." This means that to assess whether we are truly praiseworthy, we must "look within" to the impartial spectator's judgment. The letter's question ("How do you know…?") and answer ("look within") offer a spot-on summary of

Smith's counsel: we must examine our own conduct as if through the eyes of an impartial observer — effectively consulting our conscience — rather than relying on flattery or public opinion.

Letter's claim: "Imagine a quiet observer within you – a fair, disinterested judge who sees your motives as clearly as your actions. This impartial spectator is not dazzled by wealth, not moved by applause. It asks: Have you acted with justice? With benevolence? With self-command? With due regard for others?"
This encapsulates Smith's concept of the impartial spectator (a central doctrine in TMS). Let's break it down:

- "Quiet observer within… fair, disinterested judge" – Smith literally speaks of "the man within the breast, the impartial spectator, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct." He describes how we "divide ourselves into two persons… the spectator (judge) and the agent." The spectator within is by definition "fair and impartial" – an ideal "equitable judge."

- "Sees your motives as clearly as your actions" – Smith emphasizes that the impartial spectator considers not just outward actions but intentions. In TMS III.3.4, he notes the internal judge "is never to be deceived" by mere appearances; it knows our true motives. For example, if others praise us wrongly, the impartial spectator within reminds us of our actual motives and deserts. So yes, it "sees our motives" clearly.

- "Not dazzled by wealth. Not moved by applause." – Smith portrays the impartial spectator as immune to vulgar prestige. In the discussion of the poor man's son, after the deception is revealed, Smith adopts the impartial spectator's view: he notes that in real happiness (ease of body and peace of mind), the beggar and the king are equal. The impartial spectator values "ease of body and peace of mind" over opulence. It is not impressed by "palaces", "baubles and trinkets", or high titles, except insofar as they're used justly. Additionally, in TMS III.2, Smith says that if society showers unearned praise on us, our impartial spectator is not carried away – it "immediately humbles that pride." And if society unjustly blames us, the impartial spectator "corrects this false judgment." These points imply that it is steady, rational, and unmoved by the noise of public opinion or external show.

- "It asks: Have you acted with justice? with benevolence? with self-command? with due regard for others?" – Here, the letter lists the core virtues that Smith says the impartial spectator will demand of us. In TMS, Smith gives particular emphasis to: Justice, Benevolence (often termed beneficence or the "virtue of beneficence"), and Self-command. These are three of the four cardinal virtues in Smith's moral system (the fourth being Prudence, which governs self-care). The phrasing "due regard for others" essentially covers benevolence/beneficence and perhaps prudence in social contexts. In any case, nothing in this list contradicts Smith – these are precisely the virtues the impartial spectator applauds.

- Note: Smith explains that the impartial spectator develops through our experience of actual spectators—we internalize fair judgment by observing how others judge and by being judged ourselves. From TMS III.1.3: "We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce

upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct."

Letter's claim: "The impartial spectator's approval brings a kind of tranquility that the praise of the world cannot match. It is internal, stable, and independent of external admiration."
Smith consistently teaches that peace of mind (tranquility) comes from inner approval (conscience) and not from external applause. Some key references:

- Smith calls the impartial spectator (conscience) the "great guardian of… our tranquility." When we act in a way that our "man within" approves of, we enjoy a sweet serenity even if the world is ignorant or unappreciative. He writes that being truly worthy gives a secure happiness: "When we are under the discipline of the man within… if [our conduct] pleases us (when viewed impartially), we are tolerably satisfied… secure that… we deserve approbation." That security translates to contentment or tranquility.
- In contrast, "the praise of the world" is, as discussed, fickle and not sufficient for peace. Smith states that relying on public praise leaves us "in continual danger" of disappointment and mental anguish. A person whose conscience is clear can "despise the censure of the world," but one who is dependent on praise can never rest easy.
- Smith's poor man's son story concluded that after all the external success, the man realized that "in ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level" – implying that peace of mind (true tranquility) had been available all along by living simply within the bounds of virtue, not by chasing more admiration. And indeed, that peace is what a beggar under a sunny wall might have, while a king might lack it. This underscores that internal contentment is decoupled from external status.

Letter's claim: "True satisfaction comes not from wealth, titles, accolades, or applause, but from acting in harmony with the impartial spectator's standards."
This summarizes the moral argument and is strongly supported by Smith's texts:

- Smith explicitly downplays wealth and honors as sources of happiness. As noted, after the poor man's son recognizes his error, Smith calls wealth and greatness "trinkets of frivolous utility" that did not bring the "tranquillity" he sought. Earlier in TMS, he wrote, "Do they imagine that their stomach is better, or their sleep sounder in a palace than in a cottage? The contrary… is so obvious." Material superiority doesn't yield greater basic satisfaction; often a rustic life is just as physically comfortable and more mentally at peace. Thus, neither riches (wealth) nor rank (titles) reliably increases happiness.
- Conversely, "acting in harmony with the impartial spectator's standards" means living a virtuous life that one's conscience can approve. Smith strongly suggests this is the key to contentment. In TMS III.3.5, he says that when one's own conscience fully absolves and approves, one often feels "in the company of his own conscience that inward tranquility and peace of mind which are the first rewards of virtue" (a paraphrase of Smith's point in TMS III.3). Moreover, at the very end of TMS (VII.ii.4.8), Smith famously states that the applause of the whole world will avail a man little if he cannot inwardly approve of himself. Conversely, though a man's conscience should reproach him, he will be "the most miserable of mankind" even if others praise him (again paraphrasing Smith's

conclusion). This underscores that real satisfaction = inner moral harmony, not external reward.

8. The Right Kind of Ambition: Serve the Impartial Spectator, Not the Crowd

Letter's claim: "When your labour serves the desire to be worthy rather than merely admired, everything changes. Ambition becomes a source of meaning rather than anxiety. Hard work brings satisfaction rather than exhaustion."
While Smith doesn't use these exact words, this claim summarizes the psychological transformation Smith promises if one switches from pursuing praise to pursuing praiseworthiness. Evidence from Smith:

- A person who aims to be worthy (praiseworthy) is effectively guided by conscience and virtue. Smith indicates this leads to "tranquility," "contentment," and a lack of fear. For example, the wise and virtuous man, in Smith's view, feels a hardy self-satisfaction: "He regards himself… though mankind should never be acquainted with what he has done." He doesn't suffer the anxiety of "will others notice? will they applaud?" – thus his ambition (to do good, to be virtuous) is full of meaning and confidence, not the fraught anxiety of chasing fashion.

- Smith contrasts the anxious pursuit of wealth (the poor man's son's "toilsome pursuits" that gave him no peace) with the serenity of virtue. The letter's suggestion that work becomes satisfying rather than exhausting captures the idea that when work has moral purpose and one's conscience approves, it doesn't burn one out the same way. In Smith's words, doing one's duty and practicing virtue yields an "inward tranquility" that can console even amid outward hardship. For instance, someone who suffers in a just cause or labors for a noble goal can experience a "heart-felt satisfaction" that mere wealth-chasing lacks. (Smith often cited examples of martyrs or patriots who find meaning in suffering for virtue – an extreme case of hard work or sacrifice bringing deeper satisfaction rather than regret.) By contrast, someone exerting themselves for vanity is left empty – like the poor man's son who ends up cursing his decades of work.

- The phrase "ambition becomes a source of meaning rather than anxiety" strongly aligns with Smith's view that "laudable ambition" (ambition to be virtuous and useful) is healthy and even divinely inspired, whereas vain ambition (ambition to outrank others for its own sake) is fraught with anxiety.

Letter's claim: "So, work hard, by all means – but first ask what desire your work serves. Ask not, 'Will this impress others?' but rather 'Will this satisfy the impartial spectator within?'"
This ending offers a concise directive that captures Smith's counsel to individuals. Throughout TMS, Smith urges us to step outside our biases and view our actions through the eyes of an impartial spectator. In practice, that means before acting (or devoting ourselves to a career or project), we should consider: Would an impartial judge approve of my motives and deeds? This is the essence of the letter's final two guiding questions – "Will this impress others?" vs. "Will this satisfy my impartial spectator?".

This ending encourages the reader to choose the latter question as the guiding one, which is precisely Smith's teaching (see TMS III.3 and VI.iii).

Letter's claim: "Your happiness depends not on being admired, but on becoming admirable." This closing line succinctly reiterates the loved vs. lovely idea in contemporary phrasing. It is essentially a one-sentence summary of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Conclusion

Every major assertion in "Why Do You Work So Hard?" is firmly grounded in Adam Smith's writings. The letter distills *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—with a dash of *The Wealth of Nations* for historical context—for a modern audience.
