

Background for “The Danger of Admiring the Wrong People”

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February 2026

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; citations follow the Glasgow Edition as distributed by Liberty Fund, using Part–Section–Paragraph numbering from the 6th edition of 1790) and, secondarily, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (hereafter WN, originally published in 1776; citations follow the Glasgow Edition / Liberty Fund, referring to the 5th edition of 1789).

Throughout TMS, Smith uses the term “greatness” to denote social rank, power, and influence. The letter’s use of modern idioms translates, rather than replaces, Smith’s own conceptual vocabulary.

1. Admiring the Rich and Powerful

Letter’s claim: “Every age has its idols. In mine, people bowed too readily before titled ranks and inherited wealth.”

Smith does not use the word “idols,” but the substance of the claim is his. In TMS I.iii.3.1, Smith writes: “We admire, and almost worship, the rich and the powerful, and neglect persons of poor and mean condition.” Throughout TMS I.iii.3, “the rich and the powerful” denote those who possess wealth, rank, and social pre-eminence—precisely what the letter summarizes as titled ranks and inherited wealth.

Letter’s claim: “In yours, the forms have changed, but the impulse is the same.”

Smith treats this disposition as universal rather than historically contingent. He labels admiration of wealth and greatness “the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” (TMS I.iii.3.1). The emphasis on “most universal” signals that Smith regards this impulse as operating across societies and eras, not as a peculiarity of eighteenth-century Britain.

2. Visibility Mistaken for Merit

Letter’s claim: “You lift your eyes toward those who glitter... and treat their visibility as proof of merit.”

Smith repeatedly explains that wealth and rank command attention because they are conspicuous. In TMS I.iii.2.1, he writes that the rich man “naturally draws upon him the attention of the world,” and that spectators are inclined to share “those agreeable emotions” inspired by the advantages of his condition. This attention precedes judgment and easily slides into admiration. The letter’s reference to “glitter” is a modern restatement of Smith’s emphasis on splendor and conspicuous advantage as triggers of esteem.

3. The Central Diagnosis: Corruption of Moral Sentiments

Letter's claim (direct quotation): "We admire, and almost worship, the rich and the powerful, and neglect persons of poor and mean condition."

This sentence is quoted verbatim from TMS I.iii.3.1.

Letter's claim (direct quotation): This tendency is "the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments."

This phrase also appears verbatim in TMS I.iii.3.1. Smith's meaning is explicit: misplaced admiration distorts the standards by which people praise, blame, and evaluate conduct.

Letter's claim (paraphrase): "When we revere the rich and powerful, our judgment goes blind. We praise what does not deserve praise and overlook the quiet virtues that keep a free society whole."

Smith directly contrasts admiration for wealth and greatness with proper esteem for wisdom and virtue. In TMS I.iii.3.3, he writes that "the respect which we feel for wisdom and virtue... is commonly much less than that which we conceive for wealth and greatness," and that this imbalance is "altogether disproportionate." This disproportion explains how judgment becomes systematically misdirected.

4. From Corrupted Admiration to Social Disorder

Letter's claim: "And when admiration goes wrong, entire societies lose their moral and political bearings."

Although this sentence is a synthesis, each step in the underlying argument is stated explicitly by Smith and follows his own method of reasoning from moral psychology to institutional consequences.

First, Smith identifies misplaced admiration as a corruption of moral sentiments (TMS I.iii.3.1).

Second, Smith emphasizes that this corruption manifests not merely as error in taste, but as partiality in moral judgment. In TMS I.iii.3.8, he observes that the great "naturally look down with a sort of compassion upon those of a more humble station," a disposition that is reciprocated with deference and leniency. This reciprocal asymmetry distorts how conduct is judged across social ranks.

Third, Smith makes the intermediary step explicit when he explains how partiality toward the great corrupts the administration of justice itself. In TMS III.3.42–43, he notes that spectators are "unwilling to mortify" persons of high station and therefore judge their conduct with systematic indulgence. Such favoritism undermines what Smith calls the "natural sense of justice," replacing impartial judgment with deference to power and rank.

Fourth, Smith identifies justice—not benevolence—as the indispensable condition of social existence. "Justice... is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society... must in a moment crumble into atoms" (TMS II.ii.3.3). Smith reinforces this connection in WN V.i.g, where he discusses how the partial administration

of justice—favoring the wealthy and powerful—historically undermined legal equality and social trust.

Taken together, Smith’s own propositions establish the following sequence: admiration of wealth and greatness corrupts moral sentiments; corrupted moral sentiments produce partiality and leniency toward the powerful; partial administration of justice undermines the rule of law; and without justice, social order cannot endure. The letter’s phrasing condenses this Smithian chain into contemporary language.

It is important to note that Smith also presents a second, unresolved claim about admiration elsewhere in TMS. In his account of the “poor man’s son,” Smith describes admiration of wealth and greatness as a “deception of nature” that “rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” (TMS IV.1.10). Smith does not fully reconcile this productive role of admiration with his earlier diagnosis of its moral and political dangers. The present letter does not deny Smith’s account of admiration as a spur to industry; rather, it isolates a different and equally explicit strand of his argument—namely, that admiration of wealth and power, when unchecked by justice and moral judgment, corrupts governance and endangers social stability.

5. Political Judgment and Unworthy Leaders

Letter’s claim: “When wealth and celebrity command more respect than wisdom and character, unworthy leaders rise.”

Smith does not use modern electoral language, but the mechanism is his. Admiration produces deference, and deference produces authority. Because spectators admire wealth and greatness (TMS I.iii.3.1) and become obsequious toward those who possess them (TMS I.iii.3.2), esteem and influence attach to splendor rather than virtue.

Smith addresses leadership and authority directly in his discussion of “men of rank and fortune.” In TMS I.iii, he notes that men of rank and distinction naturally attract deference and esteem, often being elevated to positions of authority on the basis of station rather than wisdom or character.

Smith’s institutional writings reinforce this conclusion. He repeatedly warns that wealth grants privileged access to legislators and distorts public decision-making. In WN I.xi.p.10, Smith observes that the interest of merchants “is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the publick,” and that they are able “to deceive and even to oppress the publick” through influence and persuasion. He therefore urges that proposals originating from such interests “ought always to be listened to with great precaution”. These passages ground the letter’s claim that admiration of wealth and power facilitates the rise and indulgence of unworthy leaders.

6. Justice Bent by Admiration

Letter’s claim: “When society instinctively reveres the wealthy and powerful, their faults are excused... Justice becomes unequal.”

Smith explicitly describes asymmetries in moral judgment between the great and the humble. In TMS I.iii.3.1–2, he explains that people naturally sympathize with the rich and powerful while

neglecting those of “poor and mean condition,” producing indulgence toward superiors and severity toward inferiors.

Smith’s observation in WN V.i.b that “civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor” is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Smith is explaining the historical origins of government under conditions of inequality, not endorsing unequal justice. The passage nonetheless underscores Smith’s recognition that wealth and power have historically shaped the administration of law.

The more direct textual basis for the letter’s claim is Smith’s account of partial justice in TMS III.3.42–43, where he notes that admiration of greatness leads spectators to judge the powerful with systematic leniency. When justice becomes partial—tilted toward wealth and rank—it ceases to function as the impartial restraint on coercion and abuse that Smith regards as essential to social order.

7. Corrupted Incentives and Emulation

Letter’s claim: “People pursue what society praises.”

Smith’s account of emulation makes this explicit. After asking why people strive to better their condition beyond necessity, he answers: “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). Admiration directs ambition.

Letter’s claim: “People—especially the young and ambitious—learn to imitate those who glitter, not those who are good.”

Smith’s parable of the “poor man’s son” illustrates this mechanism. The young man “admires the condition of the rich,” imagines its felicity, and devotes his life to pursuing wealth and greatness (TMS IV.1.8–10). Admiration thus teaches imitation, even when the admired object is morally misleading.

8. Servility and the Erosion of Freedom

Letter’s claim: “Misplaced admiration breeds servility.”

Smith’s term is “obsequiousness,” and he treats it as a moral failing generated by admiration of greatness. In TMS I.iii.3.2, he writes that obsequiousness toward superiors arises from admiration of their situation. Such servility undermines the moral equality and mutual respect necessary for a free society governed by impartial rules rather than personal deference—and thereby weakens the ‘main pillar’ of justice that Smith regards as indispensable (TMS II.ii.3.3).

9. Self-Interest, Avarice, and Rapacity

Letter’s claim: Smith never praised greed; he warned against it.

The letter distinguishes between self-interest and greed using modern terminology. Smith himself does not use the word “greed,” but he repeatedly condemns what would now be called greed under terms such as “avarice” (TMS VII.ii.4.8), and the “...mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers...” (WN IV.iii.c.9).

Smith's conceptual distinction is clear. In TMS, he explains the difference between ordinary, legitimate self-interest (TMS VI.i.5-13) and avarice, which is an excessive, morally distorted desire for wealth that is socially corrosive, and overrides justice and self-command. He stresses that justice is the main pillar the upholds society and that avarice and rapacity, which is self-interest pursued through coercion and monopoly, undermine justice (TMS II.ii.3.3-4). In the WN, he discusses how ordinary self-interest—operating within the bounds of justice—facilitates voluntary exchange (WN I.ii.2). But in Book IV, when merchants lobby for monopoly privileges, that becomes rapacity. Also, as noted above, in WN I.xi.p10, Smith explicitly warns that the rapacious interests of merchants and masters are often “in opposition to that of the public” and prone to “deceive and even to oppress.”

10. The Impartial Spectator as a Corrective

Letter's claim: Each person carries a better guide for admiration—the impartial spectator.

Smith introduces the impartial spectator as the internal standard by which conduct is judged when actual spectators are biased or dazzled by splendor. “An appeal lies... 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” (TMS III.2.32). This internal judge evaluates conduct by propriety, justice, and self-command rather than by wealth or rank.

11. Final Claim: Societies Rise or Fall with Their Objects of Admiration

Letter's claim: “A society rises—or sinks—to the level of what it chooses to admire.”

This is not a direct quotation, but it faithfully synthesizes Smith's framework. Smith argues that moral sentiments are formed through social experience: “The general maxims of morality are formed, like all other general maxims, from experience and induction” (TMS III.3.31). Praise and blame teach people what is valued (TMS III.2.6). If a society systematically praises wealth and power (TMS I.iii.3.1), that admiration shapes moral sentiments, which in turn distort judgments of justice (TMS I.iii.3.2; TMS III.3.42–43). Because justice is the “main pillar” of society (TMS II.ii.3.3), the objects of admiration ultimately influence whether social order can endure.

Conclusion

Major assertions in “The Danger of Admiring the Wrong People” are grounded in Adam Smith's own texts. The letter draws directly on Smith's analysis of admiration, emulation, justice, and moral judgment in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, supplemented by his institutional realism in *The Wealth of Nations*.